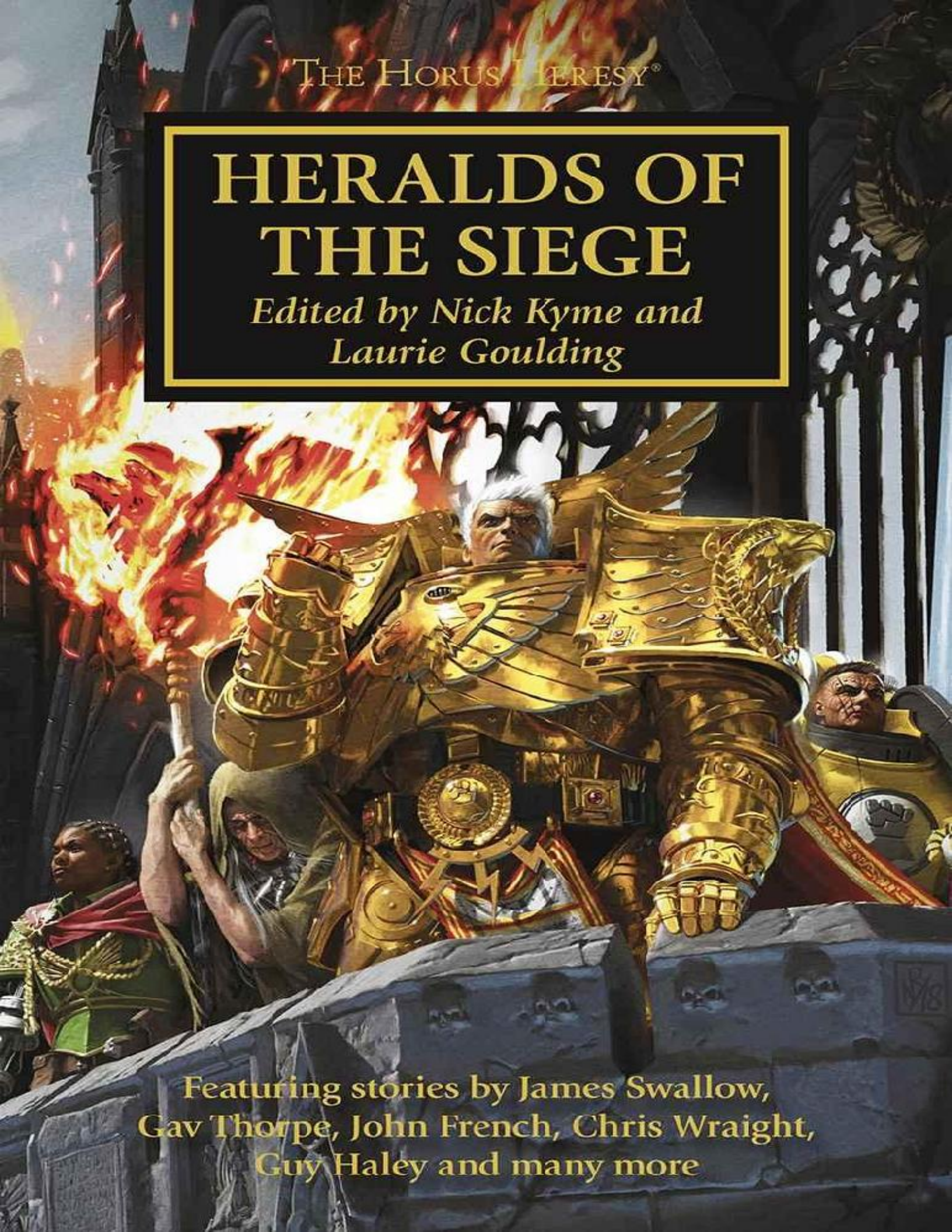
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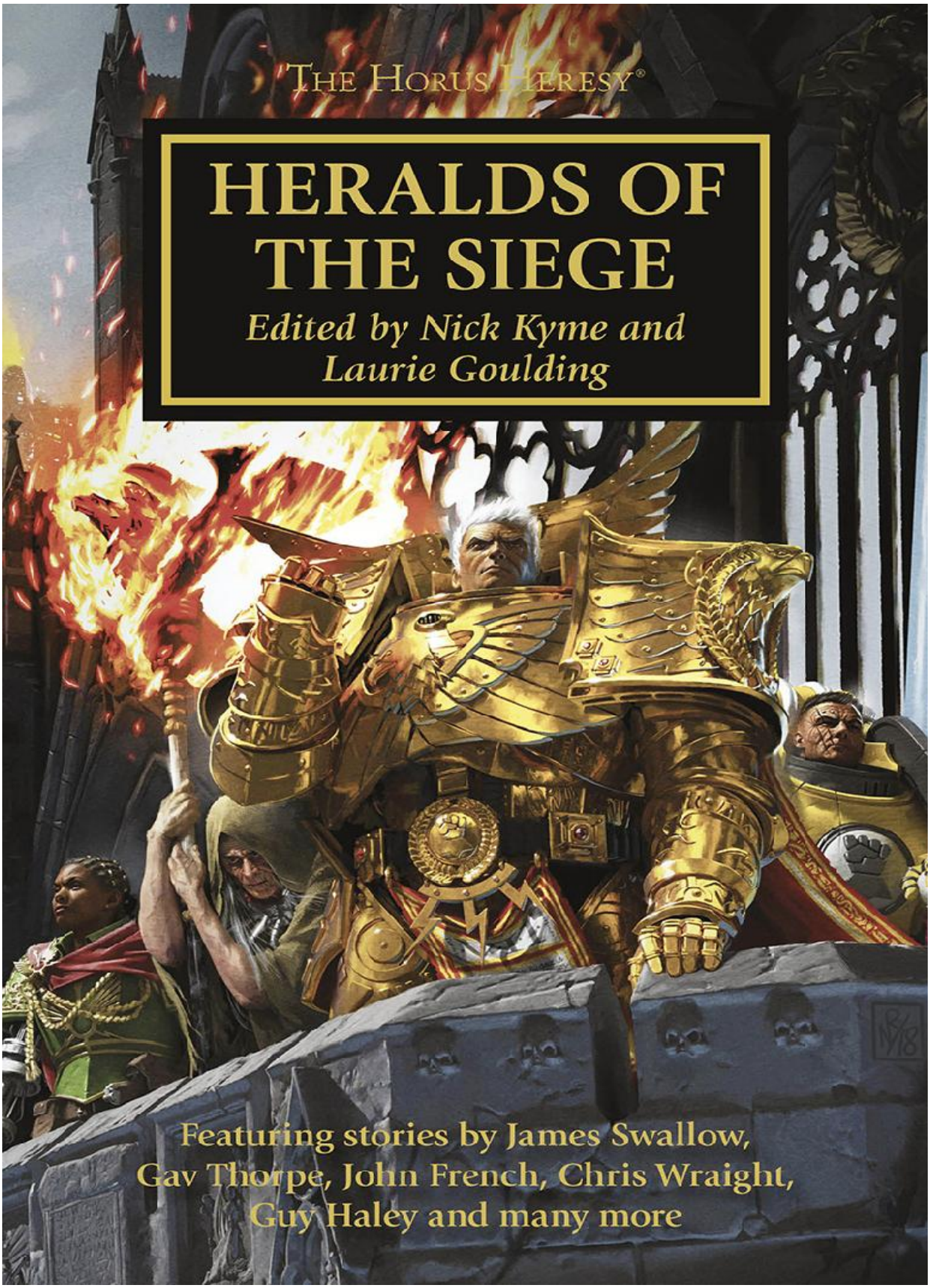
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THE HORUS HERESY®

HERALDS OF THE SIEGE

Edited by Nick Kyme and Laurie Goulding

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

MYRIAD

Rob Sanders

The Martian soil trembled. Beneath the Temple-Tarantyne assembly yards, something was rising.

Once a glorious spectacle of magna-machinery and Titan production, the southern installation had produced the mighty god-machines of the Legio Excruciata. Now its great production temples glowed with the unholy light of corruption. Chittering constructs went to work on towering perversions – looming monstrosities that should have been Warlord Titans but instead were metal monsters of daemonic infestation and heretek weaponry.

Row upon row of such beasts stood silent in the storage precincts, waiting for the orbital mass conveyers that would take them to bulk freighters destined for the Warmaster's forces.

But those mass conveyors would not come.

With the Forge World Principal blockaded by the VII Legion, nothing was leaving Mars. Like the monstrous tanks, fevered warrior-constructs and ranks of empty battleplate sitting in storage bays across the surface, the Chaos Titans gathered Martian dust.

Dust that now rained down about the towering abominations as the bedrock quaked beneath them.

A Warlord Titan was a walking fortress of thick plate and powerful shielding. As any who had ever faced such an apocalyptic foe understood, it had few weaknesses. As a former princeps of the Collegia Titanica, Kallistra Lennox had the distinction of both piloting and felling such god-machines. She knew that one of the few vulnerabilities the Mars Alpha-pattern Warlord had was a weak point on its command deck, but the deck was almost impossible to reach for ground troops.

Standing in the gyroscopic interior compartment of the Mole burrowing transport *Archimedex*, Lennox felt the adamantium prow drilling a phase-fielded tunnel through the Martian bedrock and soil, then finally breaking the surface into the assembly yards. While the large tunnelling vehicle emerged upright, like a rising tower, the crowded troop compartment maintained its rolling orientation within, which would make disembarkation a smooth affair. The princeps had directed the translithope to rise up next to a Warlord Titan identified as *Ajax Abominata*. Loyal constructs had been watching the installation for weeks from the scrap-littered sides of the surrounding mountains. The construction of *Ajax Abominata* was all but

complete, although its armoured shell was still covered in a scaffold, complete with mobile gantries.

It was a target ripe for sabotage – and the princeps knew exactly how to do it.

Not that she looked very much like an officer of the Collegia Titanica any more. While she still wore her uniform amid scraps of flak and carapace, it was tattered and stained with oil. The black leather of her boots was scuffed and her gloves crudely cut to fingerlessness. She wore an eyepatch where her ocular bionic had been torn out, and a short chainblade sat heavy upon her belt where a ceremonial sabre used to hang. Grenades and hydrogen flasks dangled from a bandolier while in her hands the princeps clutched the chunky shape of a plasma caliver.

‘Stand by,’ she said, sternly.

The loyalist Mechanicum cell to which Lennox belonged had been dubbed the Omnissian Faithful. Like all its adherents, Lennox was a Martian survivor. Left behind in the exodus to Terra, she had become a rebel on her own world. While the scrapcode tore through the Forge World Principal, corrupting everything it touched, there had been some Martians and constructs who had followed their instincts. As part of a disgust response – like a person making themselves sick after ingesting a toxin or poison – some true servants of the Omnissiah had had the strength to mutilate themselves. They tore bionics from their bodies, severed hardlinks and burned out wireless receivers. Ports and interfaces were gouged out, their bodies and minds cut off from the code-streams of the Martian networks. They had saved themselves from the infected data that brought madness, spiritual pollution and the warping of flesh and form.

It was a corruption that had claimed nearly all who had not escaped the Red Planet, even the Fabricator General himself: Kelbor-Hal, now no more than a withered bundle of polluted workings. Like the magi below him and the constructs below them, he had become a slave to darkness. A puppet controlled by the renegade Warmaster Horus, light years distant.

In the Mole’s troop compartment stood a motley collection of blank-faced adepts, battle-smashed skitarii, liberated tech-thralls, indentured menials, gun-servitors saved by their masters, vat-engineered work-hulks, harnessed ferals and bastardised battle-automata. All were pledged to the Omnissian Faithful but had needed a leader in the field. Someone of a tactical mind and

destructive disposition to help the rebels in a campaign of sabotage and subversion.

When Lennox had joined them, they had found just such a leader.

‘Ten seconds,’ the princeps told the rebel constructs about her. Her seconds, Omnek-70 and Galahax Zarco, waited either side of the bulkhead. Omnek-70 was skitarii – a Ranger who carried the length of a transuranic arquebus. Zarco, meanwhile, was a hulking enginseer who hefted a power axe in the shape of an Omnissian cog. Lennox listened for the sound of the drill and phase fields on different materials. She stamped on the deck.

‘Ratchek,’ she called to her former moderatii and the Mole’s goggled operator. ‘Kill the main drive. Open outer doors.’

The layered bulkheads sighed hydraulically, and slipped aside to reveal the shadowy interior of the scaffold complex.

Lennox nodded. ‘Go.’

The structure was swarming with afflicted constructs going about their duties, and before long Lennox and her rebels found themselves fighting up through the blind spots and gauntlets of the scaffold interior. Meanwhile, heavily armed security forces – drawn from their perimeter posts by the Mole’s emergence – were running across the assembly yards and converging upon the Titan.

The compartments and ladderwells of the towering complex were filled with the cacophony of gunfire. The Omnissian Faithful had to make use of whatever untainted weaponry they could scavenge and could not afford god-pleasing uniformity. Laslocks blasted bolts across the darkness of the decks. Shells from stub-carbines tore up through catwalks. Arc rifles threw streams of lightning along gantries. Lennox anticipated the arrival of the rebels by tearing grenades from her bandolier and throwing them up through the ladderwells and into the levels above.

Ajax Abominata, even in the final stages of its dread assembly, was what she had come to expect from a corrupted god-machine, swarming with twisted artisans prattling scrapcode and insanity.

The rebels moved up at speed and with merciless gunfire delivered at point-blank range. The corrupted army of constructs tending the monstrous Titan were ill-equipped to repel such a direct attack. The assembly yard’s security forces and shock troops hadn’t entertained the possibility of an assault on Temple-Tarantyne coming up through the installation’s foundations. While they babbled and ran towards the towering scaffold,

Lennox and her rebels hauled themselves up through the structure. Heavy servitors and cyborg corruptions shrieked as they were blasted aside. Chainblades opened up the traitor constructs in fountains of blood and oil before sending them flailing off the scaffold's edge.

The rapid advance was not met without resistance. About them the very metal of the Titan's outer hull and the surrounding scaffolding warped with daemonic presence. Infernal eyes opened in the walls. Hatches opened explosively to vomit acidic ichor or shoot grasping tentacles at the rebels. Deck openings became fang-lined mouths that cut insurgents in half. The fighting got close and tangled on a platform crowded with strapped-down stores and cargo nets. They were rushed by servitors with black filth bubbling from their mouth-grilles and a fell light behind their eyes. Lennox ordered her expendable ferals with their limb-fused weaponry into the fray, supported by engineered hulks who tore the traitor servitors limb from corrupted limb.

Higher up, the rebels became caught in a furious exchange of fire as a twisted member of the Titan crew took charge on the scaffold deck, joined by sentries running up the mobile gantries. The stairwell turned into a horrific kill-zone. Lennox didn't have time or bodies to spare in pushing on through and so cut up through the mesh flooring with her chainblade. Sending a small group up through the hole with Galahax Zarco, she watched the enginseer swing his power axe about him. With heavy footfalls he took apart possessed servitors and buried the crackling weapon in the Titan crewmember with a sickening thud. With the gauntlet broken, Lennox ordered the rebels onwards and upwards.

The compartments about the Titan's command deck had been locked off by the time the rebels reached it. Engineering constructs gargled corruption at them through the metal.

'We don't have time for this,' Lennox said to Omnek-70 and Zarco. Levelling his arquebus at the doors, Omnek-70 punched round after transuranic round through the bulkhead and into the cavity compartment beyond. As the sound of the tainted constructs died away, the enginseer buried the crackling cog of his axe in one of the round-punctured doors and heaved it aside. Lennox slipped through, her plasma caliver hugged in at her chest.

The compartment stank of corruption and was wreathed in a lead-coloured smoke. There were warped bodies on the floor with gaping holes through

their polluted workings where Omnek-70 had shot them through. A tech-adept came at the princeps, wielding a heavy multi-tool like a club. Leaning into the kick of the caliver, she blasted the thing into oblivion, before turning to face another filth-spewing construct, burning it from existence.

‘Open it up,’ Lennox said to Galahax Zarco as they strode through the compartment and climbed up onto the outer shell of the Titan’s head. From there they could see many other Titans in the gloom of the colossal assembly yard. They were all in different stages of completion, some surrounded by warped scaffolding. Lennox looked down at the corrupted hull of *Ajax Abominata* beneath her boots. The princeps could feel the suffering of the afflicted machine-spirit within.

‘Princeps,’ Omnek-70 called from the scaffold exterior, his optics whirring through different filters. He pointed out across the assembly yard. ‘The *Ventorum* is powering up.’

Lennox grunted. The Warlord Titan *Belladon Ventorum* was one of the many god-machines waiting in the assembly yard precincts for transportation off-world – and it had stood there a long time, judging by its relatively uncorrupted appearance. While most of its weaponry was too powerful to use without damaging the precious *Ajax Abominata*, its mighty gatling blaster was capable of turning the scaffolding upon which they stood into a blur of shredded scrap.

‘Enginseer, work fast,’ she called.

‘As fast as I can,’ Zarco replied. While a simple hatch, even a reinforced one, shouldn’t have been a problem for a priest of Mars, the corrupted metal sickeningly retracted from Zarco’s tools.

As he finally forced the grotesque thing open, Omnek-70 pointed his arquebus down into the musty darkness of the bridge space. There was no crew on the command deck and Lennox didn’t have time for the intricacies of sabotaging such a complex machine. All she knew was that the most sophisticated piece of equipment on a Titan was the manifold interface and mind-impulse technologies that would link the crew to the machine. Zarco stood aside to let Lennox get past him to the hatch.

‘Pass them along,’ the princeps ordered, as her rebel followers formed a line.

One by one they passed along the demolition packs they had carried with them. Zarco primed the timers before handing the devices over to Lennox, who dropped them down through the hatch.

‘Go!’ she called, moving the Omnissian Faithful off the Titan’s afflicted hull and back into the scaffold complex.

A mobile gantry completed its ponderous swing into position, connecting with the scaffolding, and Lennox’s constructs began exchanging heavy fire with enemy forces running the length of the groaning platform. A tech-thrall exploded in gore and workings as the beam of some tainted weapon hit him. Servo-automata were blasted to shreds and gun-servitors received glowing auto-rounds to the head.

‘Get back!’ Lennox ordered, unleashing a storm of plasma up the ladderwell.

She felt the metal of the walls about her retract and tremble with fury and pain as the plasma stream burned up through both opening and flooring to turn the deck above into a light storm. The half-bodies of smouldering constructs thudded down on top of them.

A daemoniac artisan screeched at the rebels. ‘And you, afflicted thing!’ Lennox roared back, slapping another tri-flask into her plasma caliver and blasting a response. She felt the metal hand of Omnek-70 on her shoulder.

It was time to leave.

‘Tactical withdrawal,’ she ordered, prompting a vat-engineered work-hulk carrying a heavy stubber to stream suppressing fire along the length of the mobile gantry, allowing the rebels time to slide back down through the lower decks. Throwing the caliver across her back on its strap, Lennox clasped the edge of a ladder with the inside of her boots and a loose-gloved grip. Sliding down through the corpse-strewn decks of *Ajax Abominata*’s rig, she hit the bottom and got out of the way for Omnek-70 and the much larger Zarco.

The ground floor was a storm of thin, dark beams and arc streams tearing through the scaffolding from reinforcements closing in from outside. The assembly yards were huge and it had taken the installation’s sentries some time to converge upon the Mole and the targeted Titan. The gunfire of Dark Mechanicum constructs cut through the jabbering scrapcode and klaxons shrieking across the assembly yard. As rebels stumbled through the lower level, many were cut down by infernal shock troops closing on their transport.

‘Ratchek, reverse drill,’ Lennox called to the moderatii as she hauled herself up to the scratched hull of *Archimedex*. Slapping thralls and limping battle-automata in through the Mole’s hatch, Lennox felt the scaffold’s superstructure tremble.

The explosives fired.

*Ajax Abominata'*s command deck exploded, blasting the head of the Titan into nothing more than shattered wreckage, raining flaming debris down through the scaffold rig.

'Princeps,' Omnek-70 said with a cyborg's lack of emotion and urgency, and pulled Lennox towards the waiting Mole. She nodded. The mighty *Belladon Ventorum* was also sending quakes through the assembly yards with its every step, the monstrous Titan moving into position. The rebels' work here was done. *Ajax Abominata* would be going nowhere without a command deck.

With Zarco and Omnek-70 in, Lennox stepped inside the transport and heaved the bulkhead shut.

Safe once more below ground, *Archimedex* nonetheless rocked with the quaking force of the explosions above as *Belladon Ventorum* opened fire upon the scaffolding complex of its sister engine.

Climbing down through the Mole, Lennox felt the rumble fade as they ploughed down through the bedrock to safety. Not even a Warlord's terrible weaponry could reach them down here.

It was a job well done. She had denied the Warmaster *Ajax Abominata*, saving the countless loyalist lives that the monstrous machines would have claimed. She turned and hit the internal vox-stud.

'Ratchek, fire up the noospherics,' she said with satisfaction. 'Have Invalis Base advised – mission success. Tell them we're inbound.'

Lennox wiped down the squat barrel of her caliver with an oily rag, listening to the booming churn and scrape of soil passing along *Archimedex*'s hull. It had been a couple of hours since they had left the Temple-Tarantyne assembly yards.

Ratchek voice crackled over the internal vox. '*We have a request for assistance*.'

'Who?' Lennox said, standing.

'*A scavenger party. Units Forty-Four-Torq and Scallion-Six-One*.'

Lennox knew Invalis Base routinely sent out teams to gather uncorrupted weaponry and equipment, but it was rare to see them this far out. 'Where?'

'*The Autonox solar collection fields*,' Ratchek replied. '*We're coming up on their comm-signature now*.'

'What's their problem?' Lennox muttered. She wasn't in the habit of exposing their position for scavengers too lazy to haul their finds back to

Invalis Base, no matter how dangerous or essential their work was to the Omnissian Faithful.

‘*Pinned down*,’ the moderatii told her, ‘*by troops tagged with idents associated with Kelbor-Hal himself.*’

Lennox nodded. While she was loath to interrupt their journey back to Invalis Base, it would be much worse to have affiliated scavenger parties captured and give up its location under binary-torture.

‘Tell them to await extraction,’ the princeps said. ‘Confirm their position, and prepare to surface.’

Ratchek broke ground a little distance off the comm-signature. Leaving the burrowing transport, Lennox emerged into the Martian dusk with Omnek-70 and Zarco. The three insurgents found themselves in the smashed and smouldering remnants of the Autonox fields. The vast solar array had suffered in the civil war, with many of the revolving panels a shattered mess and the collector stations decimated.

Moving up with her plasma caliver, Lennox froze at the sound of a vehicle in the sky. Crouching behind a demolished solar panel, she reached out for Omnek-70, who passed her a pair of magnoculars. As she peered up through the wreckage and into the sky she could make out a grav-craft, billowing smoke. Its interior glowed with the horrid brilliance of corruption and its loudhailer barked scrapcode-induced madness. The symbol on the side of the hull was that of the Ordo Reductor.

‘It’s Gordicor,’ Lennox said to Omnek-70 and the enginseer. ‘Or his minions.’

Successes like the one secured at Temple-Tarantyne had not gone unnoticed by the Dark Mechanicum. Accordingly, Kelbor-Hal had charged Magos Reductor Diemon Gordicor with locating saboteurs and seditious constructs. The execution squads of the Ordo Reductor were perfectly suited to hunting down and obliterating camps of hiding loyalists.

Their gathered intelligence told the Omnissian Faithful that Gordicor was answerable only to Aulus Scaramanca and the Fabricator General himself – the magos had secured successes of his own, as testified by loyal constructs recruited from the ashes of such outposts and bases. Lately, Gordicor’s troops had appeared with greater regularity in the southern hemisphere and the polar regions, suggesting to the leadership of the Omnissian Faithful that he was now closing in on *their* position.

As the rebels moved through the wreckage of the fields, they took cover once again at the sound of gunfire. The grav-craft was strafing the ground with the atomising stream of an under-turret mounted eradication beamer. As Lennox got closer, she could hear the distinctive sound of rad-cleansers and see the flash of beam impacts past the shattered remains of a toppled solar collector. There she spotted the huddled shapes of three constructs, hiding from the fighting beyond.

‘Find a position,’ Lennox told Omnek-70. The skitarii silently obeyed, slipping off with his arquebus to find a place from which to offer covering fire. As always, the Ranger had orders not only to kill Dark Mechanicum constructs but also to put a transuranic round through any members of the Omnissian Faithful if a situation become unworkable and capture seemed likely. The resistance the rebels offered on Mars – symbolically and actually – was bigger than any one construct, even Lennox herself. The princeps had told Omnek-70 that she would much rather suffer his marksmanship than be taken alive into the bosom of corruption.

‘What by Holy Mars is going on?’ the princeps hissed as she came up behind 44-Torq and Scallion-61. They were a couple of scavengers with a talent for spotting untainted weaponry and equipment. They had also brought back to Invalis their fair share of recruits and salvaged constructs. They had the sallow skin of forge-worlders, and their overalls were filthy. Their belts were nests of tools for recovering salvage and they carried cargo nets on their backs full of reclaimed parts, equipment and supplies. 44-Torq looked around, startled to find two shapes behind him, but looked down at the sand in relief as he recognised Lennox and the hulking enginseer.

‘Are we glad to see you,’ Scallion-61 said.

Lennox ignored him. ‘Who’s he?’ she asked, pointing her caliver at the ragged figure crouched next to him. Dressed in the remains of a ribbed suit and wearing a gas-masked hood, the gaunt figure had numerals printed across his forehead.

‘Lenk Four-of-Twelve,’ said the stranger, offering his hand. Beyond the burns on his suit, he looked fine to Lennox. Certainly not tainted.

‘He’s been with us for a few days,’ Scallion-61 said. ‘Indentured forge labourer. We found him while searching through Dynax Maximal. Says he was over at Icaria.’

Lennox had been sent over to the rebel forces holed up in the Icaria-Selenium Basin. All she had found was ash and charred bodies.

‘We’re bringing him in,’ Scallion-61 said confidently. ‘Well, we were.’

‘They almost had us.’ 44-Torq nodded over at the gunfire. ‘Thallaxii – the Ordo Reductor. They came out of nowhere.’

Lennox lowered her head as a heavy weapons cyborg unleashed a photon thruster cannon at the grav-craft from the ground. A repulsor engine on the craft exploded, causing it to bank and crash spectacularly into the sands.

‘Who are they fighting?’

‘This, you will not believe,’ 44-Torq told her. ‘They’re killing each other.’

Lennox was incredulous. ‘Infighting in Kelbor-Hal’s ranks?’

It seemed strange to the princeps. The corruption suffered by such constructs had been absolute in her experience. They were slaves to darkness.

‘We were trying to secure a find,’ Scallion-61 told her. ‘A real prize. A Kastelan-class battle-automata. Pretty beaten up, but in one piece and without a hint of corruption.’

‘What happened?’

‘Gordicor’s shock troops swooped in on a pass,’ 44-Torq said. ‘We ran for our lives and hid, obviously. Except, when the cyborgs deployed, they didn’t seem interested in sweeping the area for us at all. It seems like they were looking for the unit, too.’

‘The Kastelan?’ Lennox said.

‘They took our find,’ Scallion-61 said with obvious regret.

44-Torq shrugged. ‘We hid here for a while and, before we know it, they’re firing on one another...’ As his word trailed off, the sound of gunfire faded, and the scavenger fell silent.

The battle was apparently over.

Lennox heard the trudge of footsteps up behind. It was Omnek-70.

‘They’re all dead,’ he told the princeps with confidence. ‘Come and see.’

He led the way through the wreckage of the shattered solar collectors. 44-Torq and Scallion-61 scrambled over to their find, where Enginseer Zarco joined them. While Lenk 4-of-12 and Lennox walked slowly through the carnage, Omnek-70 moved from body to heavily armoured body, checking that the Thallaxii were truly dead. Such cyborg warriors were known for their resilience.

The Kastelan lay immobile in the red dust. It looked wholly unremarkable, and Lennox paid it no further mind.

‘Report,’ she said after Omnek-70 had returned from the crash site.

‘Confirmed. All dead. For attacking their own allies, they were thorough.’

‘That doesn’t make any sense,’ Lennox muttered.

‘That’s not all,’ Omnek-70 said. ‘These aren’t the only bodies. Look here and here. Skitarii forge-guard out of Vertex Australis.’

‘They’re a long way from their forge,’ the princeps said.

‘While some of the skitarii have been blasted apart,’ the Ranger said, ‘some of the kill shots are galvanic.’

‘You’re saying some of them turned on their own, like the Thallaxii.’

‘Not just that,’ Omnek-70 informed her. ‘This body exhibits the kind of corruption associated with scrapcode infection, as does this... But *this* one does not. Nor this one. If we had come across this skitarii or that cyborg before they were destroyed, we would probably have tried to recruit them.’

‘Fascinating,’ Lennox said in a tone that suggested it was anything but. ‘Perhaps Gordicor is becoming more subtle in his methods. Enginseer, what do we have on the Kastelan?’

‘These markings,’ Zarco told her. ‘First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve Cohort. The barrel on the shoulder-mounted bolt cannon has burned out and the maxims on its arms are empty. Shielding and automotives are down – probably a drained reactor. Wait…’

‘What?’ Lennox demanded. She and Lenk 4-of-12 were already giving the thing a wide berth. When the enginseer suddenly got up and backed away, the princeps tensed.

‘Is it polluted?’

Zarco didn’t answer at first. He stared down at the hulking robot before moving back in to check its cranial housing.

‘I’m not detecting any evidence of corruption,’ the enginseer told her. With the plating and visor optics removed, he peered inside the workings of the battle-automata’s head. ‘But I’m also not finding any evidence of a bio-plastic cerebra, or doctrina wafers.’

‘No wetware?’ Lennox asked.

‘Or operational hardware.’

‘But looking at the evidence,’ Omnek-70 said, ‘this unit was responsible for the deaths of at least some of the forge-guard – the Thallaxii also.’

‘It might have something to do with this,’ Zarco said, pointing at an object at the centre of the Kastelan’s chest with his axe, seeming not to want to get too close. It was an intricate orb of polyhedral cogs and interlocking gears.

The Byzantine arrangement became smaller and more complex the deeper they stared into its disturbing depths.

Lenk 4-of-12 came up behind Lennox, transfixed by the thing. As he peered around her shoulder, the princeps shrugged the menial off with annoyance.

‘What is it?’ Lennox asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Zarco told her honestly.

‘Enough,’ the princeps said. ‘I don’t want to be out here when the next cohort of Dark Mechanicum troops arrive looking for their fallen comrades. We’re leaving.’

‘What about the Kastelan?’ 44-Torq asked. Despite the alien thing embedded in the centre of the battle-automata’s chest, the scavenger was eager to bring back his find.

‘I leave that assessment to the enginseer,’ Lennox said.

Zarco considered. ‘It is a rare and valuable find,’ he decided. ‘Whether we refit the unit or use it for parts, the reclamation is worth the risk.’

‘Fine,’ Lennox said. ‘Then when we get back to Invalis, it can go into quarantine with this miserable specimen.’

As the princeps pushed past Lenk 4-of-12 and marched back towards the *Archimedex*, the forge labourer looked back and forth between Lennox and the battle-automata.

‘What does she mean, “quarantine”?’

The Mole pushed through the hole in the cave wall and settled on the cradle of its tracked carrier. Exiting the gyroscopic troop section, Lennox marched down a set of stairs slid out by a pair of hunchbacked servitors. The cave was crowded with other tunnelling machines that were the workhorses of the Omnissian Faithful’s holy work: Hellbores, Termites and smaller breaching drills.

‘Process the retrievals,’ the princeps ordered as she departed *Archimedex*, leaving Zarco and Omnek-70 in charge. ‘I’m going to see the lexorcist.’

Lennox made her way through Invalis Base. Situated as they were, deep beneath the highlands, the Omnissian Faithful had so far managed to avoid the attention of the Dark Mechanicum. Orbital surveillance stations and Marauder Vigilants criss-crossed the hemisphere with their augurs and pict-feeds. Ordo Reductor extermination squads searched for rebel elements forge by forge. Daemon engines stalked the dunes of Mars, following the sweet scent of un-warped flesh.

None had found Invalis Base. Using burrowing transports like *Archimedex*, the rebels of the Omnissian Faithful broke surface leagues away, ensuring that no track, no footprints or heat signatures left a trail back home.

The region had always been a dead zone, avoided by the Mechanicum and Knightly orders alike. Crystal deposits in the mountains gave off a strange radiation that resisted augur scans, turned data-streams to static and drained cells of power. The highlands were scattered with the rusted wrecks of constructs, vehicles and aircraft that had accidentally wandered in, while the canyons swarmed with feral servitors, whose populations in such an area had gone unchecked. With the base situated in a small network of caves far below the mountains, the Omnissian Faithful managed to operate beyond the debilitating technological phenomenon, while at the same time benefiting from its natural protection.

Lennox moved through numerous gauntlets and checkpoints, manned by heavily armed gun-servitors and monstrously bastardised servo-automata. The base itself was a ramshackle place of draping power cables, scavenged equipment and facilities creatively crafted from scrap. Genetors worked on vat-bred reinforcements in their improvised labs. Lennox passed liberated tech-thralls who stood at their posts in the rags of their old uniforms. Cybernetically adapted labourers and menials moved crates of ammunition, blessed unguent and supplies to the lower caves. Scavengers delivered weapons and recovered parts to the artisans in the workshops. Repulsor drones drifted about their duties, while enginseers made constant repairs and rough refurbishments to the base. Code scrubbers monitored the local lines, code-streams and noospherics for any hint of corruption. Consoles and runebanks, meanwhile, were manned by exhausted adepts and half-mangled servitors.

As Lennox marched down the grille walkways, she acknowledged the leaders of other rebel groups heading out on missions to the surface – former skitarii sub-alphas, secutor priests and Adsecularis thrallmasters, all leading squads of mismatched troops and constructs.

The command centre was a crowded nexus of battered runebanks, cabling and interfaced servitors. The crackle of hololithic displays lit up the gloom, while the air was thick with noospheric chatter and scrubbed vox-streams. Entering the command centre, Lennox found Arquid Cornelicus – the magos catharc in charge of base security. The priest moved between a nexus of

runescreens, with a nest of data lines and cables reaching down from the ceiling and plugged into the many ports and interfaces that covered his body. Watching over his work was the hag logista, Algerna Zephyreon – a tall but crooked construct in ragged red robes. The depths of the ancient's hood were lit by optics of ever-changing colour and sequence, while her emaciated form clicked continually with calculus engines like a fine clockwork instrument.

She waited upon the third construct observing the runescreens in the command centre. Trundling forth on a tracked throne was Raman Synk, lexorcist ward engine and leader of the Omnissian Faithful.

Synk had been a covenant agent of the Mechanicum, responsible for the prosecution of techno-heresy for the Prefecture Magisterium, the Malagra and the Lexorcist General of Mars. He had been better prepared than most when the infectious corruption of the scrapcode swept across the Red Planet and the maddened Fabricator General had declared war on all true subjects of the Omnissiah.

But Synk had paid a terrible price in those early days of war and betrayal. Now he was but a broken construct.

He had found purpose, however, in the doom of Mars. In the dark days since, he had established the Omnissian Faithful and launched a campaign of sabotage and destruction upon the Dark Mechanicum, from deep beneath Invalis.

Although he was little more than a red-robed cadaver restricted to a throne, the metal digits of Synk's skeletal hands were at constant work upon the runekeys of a claiverboard built into his chest. A floating servo-skull called Confabulari-66 with an undercarriage of tools, interface lines and clawed appendages fussed about him, attending to the lexorcist's needs. Synk's voice even proceeded from loudhailers mounted on the servo-skull.

'My lord,' Lennox said, stepping through the cables of the command centre and kneeling briefly. Confabulari-66 circled the princeps slowly.

'Princeps,' the lexorcist said through the servo-skull's loudhailers. 'Your mission to Temple-Tarantyne was a success. A mighty god-machine denied to Kelbor-Hal and his accursed Warmaster.'

'Yes, lexorcist.'

'Yet the same scavengers reported that some hours later,' Raman Synk said, '*Belladon Ventorum*, the engine that hunted you at Tarantyne, left the assembly yards in company with two other Warlord Titans. They marched

across the Argye Planitia, the Autonox solar collector fields and on into the Invalis region. A corrupted siege company of Krios battle tanks and a section of Thallaxii joined them at Malea Corda.'

'Gordicor?'

'Undoubtedly,' the lexorcist agreed.

'Then we need to mobilise,' Lennox said. 'Why haven't you sounded the general alarm?'

'Because they stopped at Phasmi Fossae.'

'Outside the dead zone?'

'I don't think the magos reductor can know of our location,' Raman Synk told her. 'If he knew where we are, he wouldn't have sent Titans and siege equipment. He expects to find a rebel fort or camp. His god-machines won't help him here – and not in the Invalis dead zone either.' A rasping chuckle emanated from the loudhailers.

'But how could the Ordo Reductor even know we are in the area?' Lennox said.

'Timings and trajectories don't lie,' Logista Zephyreon said. 'The Titans followed you from Temple-Tarantyne, to Autonox, to here.'

'That's impossible,' Lennox told the hag defiantly. 'We were well below augur-range. We surfaced only once, to pick up scavengers and salvage.'

'The magos catharc has a theory,' Synk said.

'A theory I am putting to the test,' Arquid Cornelicus said, moving between runescreens, trailing cerebral cabling. As the main screen sizzled into focus, Lennox saw that it was showing visual-feed captures from the base's quarantine facility – a large reinforced cell that was used by the magos catharc and his code scrubbers to inspect constructs and materiel for evidence of corruption. In the reinforced quarantine chamber, the princeps could see the towering Kastelan-pattern robot standing upright but lifeless. Dwarfed by the battle-automaton and hugging the rocky wall was Lenk 4-of-12, diagnostic cabling swinging from his ports and up into the ceiling hub. Cornelicus activated the vox-receivers.

'*Get me out of here!*' Lenk 4-of-12 howled. '*Don't leave me in here with this thing!*'

The forge labourer seemed genuinely uncomfortable in the robot's solemn presence.

'You think the battle-automaton is corrupted?' Lennox asked. 'That it somehow transmitted a trace of our position?'

‘We’ll soon know,’ Arquid Cornelicus said. The princeps looked down at the floor and then at the lexorcist. The magos catharc spoke into his vox-bead. ‘Release the probes.’

Lennox watched the runescreen as mech-spiders dropped down from the quarantine chamber ceiling on thin cables. They crawled about the armoured shell of the battle-automata, fawning over it with their augur-probosces. Several flattened themselves and, trailing their lines, scrabbled between the armoured plates of the robot to inspect its inner workings.

‘Both the scavengers who found it and my enginseer examined the unit, but could find no evidence of pollution.’

‘Yes,’ Logista Zephyreon said, her voice a harsh reproach. ‘A find altogether too good to be true...’

‘The good princeps is not to be blamed for this,’ Raman Synk said, silencing the hag. ‘Diemon Gordicor becomes more desperate and devious by the day. He’s a warped construct answering to equally warped masters. He’s ready to try anything. He knows that rebel groups need a constant supply of weapons and equipment. He simply needs to scatter such tracked items about and wait for our scavengers to bring them back to base. Inevitable really.’

‘Princeps Lennox is right,’ the magos catharc said, processing the data returning from the mech-spider swarm. ‘Neither I nor my code scrubbers are finding indications of corruption. The machine appears clean.’

‘All the more reason for our scavengers to take it, in the field,’ Algerna Zephyreon insisted. ‘This is bait.’

‘What of tracking devices?’ Raman Synk asked. ‘We need to know if this battle-automaton harbours a device that led the Ordo Reductor here – at least up to the edge of the dead zone.’

‘Well, I can tell you that it has no cortex or processor,’ Cornelicus said, ‘and that its reactor core is burnt out. Although, I have some kind of energy signature.’

‘There,’ Lennox said, squinting at the visual feed. ‘In its chest – an augmentation that my enginseer couldn’t identify.’

The polyhedral cogs of the orb were in motion, each gear synchronising impossibly with hundreds of others. It was mesmerising to watch.

‘What is the name of this cursed machine?’ Raman Synk demanded to know.

‘Identica recorded as Impedicus,’ Arquid Cornelicus said. ‘First Maniple, Daedarii Reserve.’

‘By the Omnissiah, no,’ Raman Synk gasped, his projected voice wavering. ‘The Tabula Myriad.’

‘You’ve seen this thing before?’ Lennox said. ‘What is it?’

‘A long time ago,’ the lexorcist said. ‘It is a heretekal thing of monstrous power. An exigency engine – an Abominable Intelligence that I thought I had buried deep in a dungeon-diagnostica.’

‘What does it do?’ the princeps asked.

‘The Tabula Myriad *wins*. Using the coldest logic and computational power beyond the servants of the Machine-God.’

With that, the battle-automata suddenly crackled with power. The mech-spiders beneath its armoured shell were fried within the machine’s workings and their trailing lines fused to Impedicus’ feeds. The lamps and the runescreens of the command centre momentarily faded, before cycling through screeds of information at impossible speeds.

‘What’s happening?’ Lennox said.

‘It’s in,’ Arquid Cornelicus said, his voice tinged with fear. ‘It’s using the probe lines to draw power from the base reactor.’

‘Shut it down!’ the princeps shouted.

‘I can’t!’ The magos catharc tugged at the crown of cables ported into his skull. ‘It’s reversed the data-stream on the same lines. Instead of inspecting it, the machine is now raiding our runebanks. I have no base control!’

As the magos panicked and tried to rip his cables free, Lennox stepped forward. Drawing her chainblade, she gunned the weapon’s motor and cut through the cables, freeing the magos catharc from the influence of the Abominable Intelligence.

She looked back to the runescreens. Impedicus had stomped forward, trailing cable lines behind it, the Tabula Myriad’s polyhedral cogs spinning in a blur of alien synchronicity.

Lenk 4-of-12 was screaming. The menial, who had been fearful of the battle-automata when it was a lifeless shell, was now throwing himself wildly at the thick armourglass of the quarantine observation window, his data cables swinging wildly. Battering himself bloody and insensible, he shrieked like a madman. Tearing at his body and face, he turned to face Impedicus. The battle-automata drowned the forge labourer in its shadow.

The screaming stopped. Lenk 4-of-12’s face seemed to relax.

Then, horribly, he thrust his fingers into his stomach with such mindless force that he tore a gaping hole in his own abdomen. Fishing around in his guts, with dark-eyed lunacy plastered across his features, the menial tore a black, metallic device from his body. It was covered in spines and flickered with an infernal light.

'Is this what you are looking for?' Lenk 4-of-12 hissed in a voice that was not his own. The menial's skin smouldered to darkness, his teeth grew and his facial features warped into a visage of daemonic savagery. The data cables connecting him to the hub began to seethe with malevolent code.

The battle-automata Impedicus stood silently over the possessed forge-worlder.

Logista Zephyreon staggered back. Both Raman Synk and Confabulari-66 simply stared at the horror unfolding in the quarantine chamber. Lennox hit a vox-stub on the runebank.

'Activate incendiary countermeasures!' she ordered, but the code scrubbers and the gun-servitors outside the chamber couldn't hear. The Tabula Myriad was blocking the transmission. She turned to leave the command centre.

'I've got to get down there and destroy them…'

'Wait,' Raman Synk said. He was staring at the runescreen so intently that it drew Lennox back to the spectacle.

The daemon fury of Lenk 4-of-12 faltered. Rather than the Kastelan, it had been the menial recruit who had been carrying the tracking device: the device that could have led Gordicor's Ordo Reductor force to Invalis.

But now, the fused diagnostic lines bucked and flickered as Impedicus sent a cold stream of logic back into the ceiling hub.

Lenk 4-of-12 let out a pained screech so loud that it distorted the audio channels.

In the presence of the Abominable Intelligence, bathed in cold logic and the truths undeniable, the false construct was cleansed of its corruption. Lennox watched the impossible on the runescreen. The daemonic presence was banished from Lenk 4-of-12. The infernal light died in his eyes. Like tumorous growths before the intensity of radiation, the menial's corrupted flesh withered. Allowing the tracking device to drop to the floor, Lenk 4-of-12 lost consciousness and followed it, the limp data cables tugging loose from his interface ports as he fell.

Lifting an armoured foot, Impedicus stamped down on the tracking device, crushing the filth of its inner workings into the floor.

‘We found Dark Mechanicum skitarii and shock troops in the field,’ Lennox said, turning to the lexorcist. ‘They had been purged of corruption...’

Synk nodded slowly. ‘Disengage the quarantine fail-safes.’

‘What are you doing?’ Arquid Cornelicus demanded. ‘This thing must be destroyed.’

‘The enemy of my enemy,’ the lexorcist said. Confabulari-66 looked at Algerna Zephyreon. ‘We are not a threat that concerns the Tabula Myriad?’

‘Correct,’ the crone said, processing her terrible equations.

‘It wants what it has always wanted – dominion over Mars. As far as the Abominable Intelligence is concerned, we are no threat to its ambitions. The Dark Mechanicum, however, is... and it must be neutralised. In fire, or in spirit.’

‘The greater the number of pure constructs fighting the corrupted,’ the logista added, ‘the greater its chances of success.’

‘Lexorcist,’ Lennox said, ‘what do we do?’

‘Nothing,’ Raman Synk said. ‘Open all data lines.’

‘That’s insanity,’ Arquid Cornelicus said, checking over the runebanks. ‘The Abominable Intelligence is infiltrating all of our systems and noospherics with its signal. It already has transmission access to the base’s border beacons. Instead of alerting us to the presence of intruders, the beacons could advertise our presence to the whole of the quadrant!’

‘Let me hear it,’ the lexorcist ordered.

Flicking a stud, the magos catharc reluctantly allowed Impedicus’ searing signal to fill the command centre. It was simultaneously the most beautiful and horrific thing Lennox had ever heard. Code, cold and constantly recalculating. An irresistible, arithmetical force.

A song for the red sands of Mars.

Cornelicus’ nest of runescreens sizzled suddenly to static, then fell blank.

Letter by letter, word by word, a message began to appear across them – like a forgeling learning code for the first time, or a construct struggling to communicate in a different cant.

++ *EXIGENT ASSESSMENT* ++

ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE

++ *EXTERMINATION OF THREAT PRESENTATION* ++

ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE

++ *PLANETARY ASSIMILATION* ++
ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE
++ *SOLAR SYSTEM ASSIMILATION* ++
ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE
++ *GALACTIC ASSIMILATION* ++
ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE
++ *UNIVERSAL ASSIMILATION* ++
ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE/ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE/ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE/ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE/ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE/ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE/ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE/ADAPT/ENHANCE/REPLICATE...

‘We have prayed, and the Omnissiah has delivered,’ Raman Synk said finally. ‘A dire weapon for a dire threat. Fire with which to fight fire.’

‘It is heretekal,’ Arquid Cornelicus pleaded with the lexorcist.

‘Then let us all be damned, but Mars be saved. This is a heretekal weapon for heretical times. Princeps.’

‘Yes, lexorcist.’

‘I need eyes out on the sands,’ Raman Synk said. ‘Go and see what horror the Tabula Myriad visits upon the enemies at our borders.’

Looking between Cornelicus, the lexorcist and the line-draped figure of Impedicus standing in the quarantine chamber, Lennox turned and left the command centre.

Lennox peered down the magnoculars at a scene of devastation. Having Moderatii Ratchek bring *Archimedex* up at Phasmi Fossae, the princeps watched as *Belladon Ventorum* turned the wrath of its quake cannon upon its two compatriot god-machines and its mighty gatling blaster against the armoured companies and cybernetic formations at its feet. With the other two Warlord Titans now nothing more than smoke-streaming wrecks of corruption and the Ordo Reductor forces blasted to oblivion, the god-machine stood silent. Examining it through her magnoculars, Lennox watched the warped crew climb out of the top hatch of the command deck and leap to their deaths. While suffering superficial damage from fire hastily returned by its compatriot Titans, it seemed as though the element of surprise had spared *Belladon Ventorum* a mauling.

Casting her gaze across the engine, Lennox could find no sign of spiritual or physical pollution. The ghostly darkness of its void shielding had dissipated. The infernal glow of its command deck was gone.

With Omnek-70 covering them with his arquebus, Lennox led Ratchek and Enginseer Zarco across the mauled sands. Thallaxii and Krios battle tanks alike had been shredded in the rain of destruction. Picking their way through the devastation, they stood before the still form of *Belladon Ventorum*.

Lennox flashed her moderatii a smile. The goggled Ratchek nodded.

‘Enginseer, shall we?’

‘Princeps first,’ Zarco said. ‘As protocol dictates.’

It took some time to climb the shell of the mighty Titan, even making use of maintenance ladder rungs and scramble holds. The rebels found the hatch to the command deck still open. There was no need for Zarco to go to work with his tools this time.

The bridge space was cool and still. A preliminary check of the god-machine’s systems revealed that it had received the Tabula Myriad’s broadcast and that its own comm-vanes were in turn now transmitting on all channels.

As Zarco climbed down into the engineering section, ready to provide a damage report, Lennox and Ratchek interfaced with the mighty machine-spirit of *Belladon Ventorum*. They were only two for now, but they would find other experienced crew loyal to their cause in time.

Hesitantly, the moderatii ported into his deck station.

And Kallistra Lennox became one with the god-machine.

She plummeted through possibility. She was at once sense and shielding. Flesh and iron. Bone and the colossal workings of an iron behemoth. Lennox felt the machine’s pain, rage and power. She became a conduit for its apocalyptic doom. In those moments, in which monstrous possibility flooded her being, Lennox found it hard to understand how she had ever survived being separated from such Titanic annihilation.

Belladon Ventorum felt strange at first, like wearing a dead man’s boots. Its machine-spirit was all silent hostility and frustrated anger but, like a death world predator tamed, the Titan slowly took to Lennox. She felt it assess her. As she sensed the god-machine’s destructive capabilities, the machine, in turn, sensed her own. It drew upon her vengeance. It drank deep in the princeps’ cold fury.

Mars felt different through the sensors and augurs of the god-machine. Lennox was no longer a being of flesh and fragility. She need not fear the corruptions of code nor the petty fury of deranged traitors. She was beyond

such concerns. She was an unfolding tempest, looking down upon Mars and the afflicted constructs that ailed the planet with the serenity of a natural disaster. She was the calm before the coming storm.

She opened a noospheric channel.

<Invalis base, this is *Belladon Ventorum*,> Lennox said in a flurry of binaric data. <Standing by for targets.>

'*And the Tabula Myriad has provided them*,' Raman Synk's voice came, crackling over the vox in reply, '*in order of tactical importance. A four-thousand-two-hundred-and-sixty-seven-step strategy for taking back the Red Planet, executing a model of growing capability*.'

Lennox heard the hollow reservation in the lexorcist's voice. He was as uneasy as the princeps at accepting guidance from an Abominable Intelligence – an outlawed technology that in less desperate times would have earned the lexorcist's attentions and deserved the obliterating wrath of the princeps' mighty cannons.

There were evils in the galaxy, to be sure.

But as Lennox stared out across the sands of the Red Planet she came to accept – as Synk had – that the Tabula Myriad, abhorrent though it might be, was the lesser of such evils.

Lennox knew that there would be a heavy price to pay for such an alliance. She pledged vigilance in the face of such technological abomination. She promised herself and the Mars-that-was that a reckoning would come, and atonement be sought. A time when all debts and transgressions were to be paid for in full.

That time was not today. Not while the Dark Mechanicum held the Forge World Principal tight in the claw of corruption.

<Sounds like we have a lot of work ahead of us,> Kallistra Lennox transmitted with a heavy heart, as the Abominable Intelligence transmitted maps, schematics and data relating to their first target.

LEGIO VENDETTICA ARMOURY DEPOT

MARE HADRIACUM EAST

Lennox nodded her approval. *Belladon Ventorum* would need ammunition and power for its great weaponry if it was to be the herald of annihilation across the red expanse of Mars.

<Received,> Lennox said, with a smile spreading across her lips – the first in many months. <*Belladon Ventorum*, inbound.>

THE GREY RAVEN

Gav Thorpe

There was a moment during translation when everything hung between the realms of the material and the immaterial, when Balsar Kurthuri knew silence. At the threshold of existence, for an infinitesimally short instant, he was neither real nor imagined, alive nor dead, legionary nor psyker. The mesmerising, taunting, crashing background noise of the warp did not intrude upon his mind; the constant nagging whisper of his companions' thoughts and the ever-present hiss of humanity's psychic static was gone.

He remembered the first time he had left with the Raven Guard, the first time he had been upon a ship as it delved into the gap between realities. Every occasion since, on each of the countless jumps from star system to star system, he looked forward to that singular experience, hoping that perhaps this time the silence would remain.

It was not to be.

The cold clamour of his fellow Space Marines welled up around him, no matter how much he suppressed his potential, how high and thick he built his mental barriers. Even the servitors at the consoles, more machines than men, gave off a dim glimmer of life like slowly leaking reactors tripping a rad-counter over and over – the very reason for their existence being that they had souls, which true machines did not, such were the strange ways of the Mechanicum.

The Geller field dropped as the warp breach closed behind them, taking with it the nerve-tingling sensation of psychic suppression. Like a fog lifting outside a sealed door, Balsar was aware of its dissipation even though his thoughts extended no further than the limits of his own skull.

He had always been more of a receiver than a broadcaster. It was that ability that had seen him inducted into the XIX Legion and sent out with the fleet.

Layer by layer he shut away the impeding inputs, like narrowing the frequency band on a vox-caster until he had only a single channel.

Last to go were the bleeding thoughts of his companions on the bridge of the *Wrathful Vanguard*, and strongest were the mixed emotions of its commander, Captain Noriz. His emanating thoughts at returning to the Throneworld fluctuated between relief, trepidation and anticipation. Not that one needed psychic powers to discern such truth – it was obvious from the Imperial Fist's pensive expression and relentless pacing – and the bright

polish and full regalia of his war-plate – that the occasion of his return to his Legion was at the fore of his mind.

More closed but still discernible were the thought patterns of Arcatus Vindix Centurio, warrior of the Legio Custodes, who had left with the Raven Guard after their fateful acquisition of the primarch gene-code during their last journey to Terra. His face was passive, his stance relaxed, but seeping through the iron gates of his mind came pulses of something like happiness at his homecoming. Not relief, but pleasure at being returned to the place of his birth and his duty.

Even as a semblance of quiet fell upon Balsar, the placid deepness of a pool from which one hears and sees only the faintest glimmers from the surface, a physical clamour rose to fill his senses.

Sensor-servitors jabbered warnings and klaxons wailed as the augur banks came online after their deactivation for warp transit. Multiple targeting beams and intrusive hails assaulted the *Wrathful Vanguard*, threatening all kinds of trauma before even a word was uttered.

‘Warning signals off,’ snapped Noriz, his golden-yellow livery dappled by the glow from a dozen red and amber lamps. The clamour seemed to settle more than agitate him, and he spoke calmly to his officers. ‘Gun crews remain on standby, targeting systems on passive.’

A chorus of affirmatives replied.

‘Vox-channels open for contact,’ reported the legionary sergeant at the communications console. ‘Which hail do you wish to receive?’

‘How many are there?’ asked Balsar.

The sergeant checked his display.

‘Eighteen.’ He read a little more. ‘Two outer defence stations, three full line warships and the rest are escort-class monitors and patrol boats.’

‘Give me whichever has highest rank priority,’ Noriz told his deck officer. ‘Return the others with our standard identifiers.’

Balsar realised that Noriz was in his element. This was his whole world. After years fighting the war alongside the Raven Guard he was now returning to the Imperial Fists, on far more familiar ground.

The former Librarian had another revelation. ‘You were hoping for this, weren’t you?’

Noriz glanced at him with a guilty smile.

‘I’ll admit, I was far more worried about arriving and *not* being challenged.’ He nodded to the waiting sergeant. ‘Full contact, prepare for

visual feed.’

The connection crackled into life with one of the defence stations. On a sub-screen, wavering lines illustrated the several banks of weapons batteries currently locked on to their position from the fortress. Armoured figures moved in the background, mostly legionaries and several gold-armoured Custodians – to Balsar’s surprise, the figure that appeared on the main display was not dressed in the war-plate of the VII Legion, but the starched uniform of an Imperial Army officer. By the frogging and epaulets he was of some senior rank, not entirely the sort expected to find manning a comm-station. Such a secondment spoke of recent upheaval. His broad face was scarred down one side – a las-burn fresh enough that healing unguent still gave it a glossy sheen and stained the stiff collar of his dress jacket. He spoke through one side of his mouth, the other paralysed by the wound.

‘*The* Wrathful Vanguard? *Your identifier is years out of date,’* said the officer. He turned his head to someone that could not be seen, nodded and looked back at the lens. *‘Is Captain Noriz still in command?’*

‘I am Captain Noriz of the Imperial Fists. Please provide your rank and name.’

‘*Commandant-Colonel Flecht, of the Jovian Corpus.’* Flecht looked tired, heavy bags under his eyes, his speech slurred even when accounting for the injury. ‘*Hold station and await further instruction.’*

‘I must rejoin the Seventh Legion as soon as possible, commandant-colonel. I have with me Arcatus of the Custodian Guard. He will vouch for all aboard this vessel.’

‘The Legio Custodes?’ Flecht roused a little more interest. *‘I’ll note that on the application. Stand-to and await escort. If you attempt to power up your weapons you will be destroyed. If you raise your void shields you will be destroyed. If you attempt to establish communication other than through...’*

His voice tailed off as he turned again, this time to face the figures across the communications hall. A gold-plated warrior approached, their exchange too quiet for the feed pickups to detect. Flecht moved aside and was replaced by the blank-masked figure of a Custodian.

‘*Arcatus, make yourself known,’* he barked.

‘I am Arcatus,’ said the warrior, moving to stand beside Noriz. ‘The entire ship’s company has been assessed for loyalty. Few have fought harder in the Emperor’s name than those aboard this ship.’

‘You will understand, honoured companion, that verbal assurance is no assurance at all. There have been significant developments since your departure. No ship is permitted into the inner system without authentication and verification in person. A boarding party is being assembled to conduct the search.’

Noriz glanced at Balsar, sharing the moment of irony. Several years earlier it had been the Imperial Fist enforcing the security of the Solar System and the Raven Guard under suspicion. To his credit, Noriz suffered the indignity of doubt without question.

Arcatus’ mood was not so easily tempered. ‘You would delay my return to the Emperor’s side? This is no Blood Game.’

‘I am Ludivicus, personally appointed to this role by the First Lord of Terra. You will defer to the judgement of this station as if it were the judgement of Malcador himself.’

‘Does the Sigillite now sit upon the Throne?’ Arcatus demanded. ‘We answer only to the Emperor.’

‘And the Emperor has named Malcador His regent in all things. The Sigillite’s word is *the Emperor’s will, Arcatus. You know this.’*

‘What of my Lord Dorn?’ Noriz asked, his haste betraying a sudden anxiety. ‘Our scanners detect the debris of much fighting in the system. How fares the Praetorian of Terra?’

‘He lives,’ was the only reply that Ludivicus would give.

Balsar made his presence known. ‘You speak of judgement, and claim to speak in the name of Malcador, but I am afraid I must set my case before the Sigillite in person. Corvus Corax of the Nineteenth Legion dispatched me to the Throneworld to stand before the Sigillite and seek his adjudication on matters pertaining to the Edict of Nikaea, and the Librarius.’

‘And who are you to demand the personal attention of the Sigillite in these critical times?’

‘Balsar Kurthuri of the Raven Guard. Formerly of the Librarius, under personal oath to Lord Corax.’

The Custodian’s mask made it impossible to detect any change in his expression but his demeanour shifted. He stood a little straighter, his shoulders tensing. Even if Balsar allowed his other-sense free flow, the distance to the defence station was too great for a scan, but Ludivicus’ curt manner confirmed his sudden antipathy.

‘Arcatus, threat protocols are in full effect. I expect you and your followers to do your duty immediately.’

Balsar looked to the Imperial Fists captain for any explanation, but Noriz’s confused look spoke volumes.

‘Is this a test of my loyalty?’ Arcatus replied. ‘You expect a Custodian to accept the issue of such a command from another of the lowest rank, is that it? Confirm your authorisation, Ludivicus.’

‘It is not test, Arcatus. Do your duty. The authorisation is “Othrys”.’

A subconscious swell of intent from the Custodian warned Balsar a second before Arcatus swung his guardian spear. It was just enough for him to duck beneath the crackling blade. He leapt back as Arcatus swung again, his thoughts flooded with single-minded determination.

Noriz threw himself at the Custodian, wrapping his arm around Arcatus’ neck. ‘Hold! What madness is this?’

Receiving nothing more than a backhanded blow in response, he bellowed to his crew for assistance.

‘And you, get out of here!’ the Imperial Fist yelled at Balsar. ‘Go!’

Not understanding what had happened but certain that his continued survival depended upon his immediate absence, Balsar turned and ran. He heard the curses of Arcatus and the crash of ceramite colliding while the bridge doors growled open before him, and a flurry of bolters being cocked as he pounded out into the corridor.

Balsar felt the closest sensation to panic that it was possible for a Space Marine to experience – a mystifying blend of confusion and urgency that propelled him without thought along the corridors of the *Wrathful Vanguard*. His instinct took him aft and down, towards the area of the ship that had been set aside as a temporary sanctum for him. If he could reach the safety of that hall, with the ward-sigils and psychic locks that he had created himself, he could at least take a moment to assess the situation.

Thus went his reasoned justification, but he also knew that he was simply allowing instinct to drive his decision making. His conditioning, training and experience had prepared him for nearly any eventuality on the battlefield. The only time he had felt like this before had been on Isstvan, at the dropsite, the moment that the Iron Warriors’ cannons had opened fire.

Helpless. Bemused. Almost infantile in his inability to comprehend the magnitude of what was happening.

Balsar had not the slightest clue what new threat protocols had been activated, nor why Arcatus had attacked him. What was special about ‘Othrys’? He tried to tell himself that it was a misunderstanding, but the singular, instantaneous purpose with which the Custodian had turned against him proved otherwise.

The boarding alarm sounded across the ship, three short groans of the klaxon followed by three longer tones, repeating endlessly. Serf crew and legionaries would be roused from their stations – they had already been at alert, as was right for any ship dropping in-system. Yellow-armoured warriors pounded down the corridors to their squad muster points, almost oblivious to the sable-plated Raven Guard in their midst.

A flash of gold warned him of the arrival of a Custodian at a junction ahead. Not Arcatus, but one of his subordinates. The guardian paused and, fortunately for Balsar, looked down the corridor the other way first, giving him a split second to throw himself out of sight down a side passage.

He longed to break open the barriers holding his powers in check. If he could scour the passageways and corridors for the minds of his hunters, he could plot a course to his sanctum. The temptation was great, but he held back, mindful of the promise he had made to Lord Corax. With his gene-sire’s permission, he had used his talents in spite of the edict laid down by the Emperor at Nikaea – a simple trick to trigger the psychic lock of the labyrinth that had held the primarch gene-codes on Earth. They had shared a wry understanding at the time, denying his part in the act by attributing it to the will of the Emperor.

But had the subterfuge sat poorly with Corax since then? Had that act fed into some inherent distrust of psykers and the warp, leading to his later change of heart?

These thoughts were out of place, unneeded at this desperate time, but Balsar couldn’t entirely banish them as he spied another Custodian ahead. This warrior saw him and opened fire with the bolter of his guardian spear, shells snapping down the corridor.

The Space Marine replied in kind, lifting his pistol – *when had he drawn it?* – to fire off a burst without conscious thought. Dodging the Custodian’s return fire, he careened off a bulkhead and pushed on down another corridor, heading towards the starboard gun batteries.

Twice now, the Custodians had been ahead of him. Clearly Arcatus was guiding them, guessing at his destination.

He needed a better plan.

Checking that he was unobserved, Balsar pulled open the hatch to the empty magazine and stepped inside. A few empty shell crates and feed belts littered the floor – Noriz would be disappointed that they had not been tidied away properly when the stores had run out and the chamber fell into disuse.

Given a moment to think, the Raven Guard considered his situation. Along with Arcatus there were six more Custodians on board. Seven warriors could not possibly scour the entire ship.

But that was not the problem.

Even if the Custodians could not track him down, there would be others on their way. The boarding party that Ludivicus had mentioned could number in the dozens, even the hundreds. What chance did he have then of hiding?

And to what purpose? They would not give up the search if Balsar were such an important target. The unease at his mention of Nikaea meant that it had to be connected to his psychic powers, though whether the threat protocols were to apprehend or execute he was not sure. Balsar figured that it seemed likely the latter, and in any case was not prepared to risk the consequences of finding out.

If he could not stay here, there had to be some other solution…

He had to leave. He had to get off the *Wrathful Vanguard*. Perhaps even make his own way to Terra somehow, to plead his case to Malcador himself. Surely the assertion of his primarch had to count for something?

The one boon in his favour was that the Imperial Fists had not tried to hinder or apprehend him. It seemed purely a protocol of the Legio Custodes for the time being. That could change, of course, if a higher authority was brought to bear. What if Noriz received orders from his Legion command? From Rogal Dorn himself?

Balsar shook his head, dismissing these thoughts. The primarch of the VII had no knowledge of these events. The fate of a single Librarian was of no concern to him. Nor to Malcador, he suspected. This had to be a blanket authority, a standby invoked in extremis.

If Noriz wasn’t against Balsar, then the Raven Guard needed him firmly on his side. If he was going to get off the ship then he would need help. Having secured Balsar’s quarters it would occur to Arcatus to lock down all of the ship’s flight assets – with only seven pairs of hands, that would be difficult but not impossible. There were four launch bays, and two banks of

saviour pods. That would give Arcatus one warrior for the sanctum and one for each route off the ship.

When the Raven Guard survivors of Isstvan had come to Terra in the wake of the Dropsite Massacre, they had been interred pending the primarch's audience with the Emperor. During their incarceration at the hands of the Legio Custodes it had been a matter of some debate and contention whether an individual Space Marine was a match for a Custodian. The consensus arrived at by the legionaries of the XIX was that it would be a close-run fight, but ultimately they had to concede, reluctantly, that a Custodian was superior in personal combat.

Again, Balsar's thoughts returned to the next step. He needed assistance and only Noriz could provide the sort that he required. What he would do once he was free of the *Wrathful Guardian* was another matter.

There was a communications panel in the wall of the magazine. Balsar keyed it to the command channel of the bridge.

'I need to speak to Captain Noriz immediately.'

'Kurthuri? This channel is not secure! I have your position, await contact.'

The connection was cut and Balsar took his thumb from the activation stud, at a loss. Had he just given himself away? He moved to the back of the chamber, pistol aimed at the hatchway, and waited.

Minutes later, movement outside brought his finger to the trigger. Only when Noriz stepped into view did he lower the weapon.

'External address only,' the captain said, waving for Balsar to join him. A squad of Imperial Fists stood in the corridor of the gun deck outside, bolters at the ready. Several of them showed battle damage to their armour. 'Arcatus has our cipher codes. Vox-traffic is being monitored.'

'What is happening? What does Arcatus want?'

'He and his Custodians opened fire on my men. I believe he means to kill you.'

'What, they were shooting to kill you as well?'

'Warning shots, really. We've exchanged a few volleys to discourage the Custodians from getting in our way, and it seems to be working. So far. But this could escalate quickly.'

'I have to get off the ship, then.'

'That was my thinking, also. Not being able to rely on the vox has hampered my efforts, but we have a secure route through to the port aft bay.

We did when I last checked, at least. But there is an incoming Stormbird from the defence station. I don't know who is on board – more Custodians, I would think. We've managed to avoid casualties so far, and I won't resort to lethal action against the appointed Hands of the Emperor. Not on this ship, not in the light of Sol. This has to be some misunderstanding. Once you are clear, I'll signal Seventh Legion command to intervene on your behalf.'

'Arcatus seemed entirely certain what was expected of him,' said Balsar. 'This was prearranged. You heard what I heard.'

Noriz said nothing more. At a nod from their captain, the squad formed up and started moving aft.

When they reached the corridor that led across to the main dorsal transit they met up with a handful more Imperial Fists moving forward. Their sergeant approached with a salute.

'What is it, Vindar?' asked Noriz.

'The Custodians have opened the main weapons store and have taken almost all of the melta charges, my lord. They've already broken open Legionary Kurthuri's sanctum. I think they mean to disable all of the launch doors.'

'Then we have to–' Noriz stopped as two figures in gold appeared on a walkway above. Without warning they turned their guardian spears towards the group and opened fire, their bolts cracking into the armour of the Imperial Fists as they turned.

Noriz and the sergeant grabbed hold of Balsar by silent consent and hauled him away. The moment he was out of sight, the fusillade stopped.

'They're not shooting at us, then,' Vindar muttered. 'Only you.'

'My apologies for the *inconvenience*…' the Raven Guard replied.

They broke into a run, the clatter of armoured boots behind them as the other legionaries followed.

'We'll head for the closest bay and break through however we can,' announced Noriz. 'No more delays.'

'How did they get ahead of us?' Sergeant Vindar's question was punctuated by the whine of bolts from the hallway junction ahead. Three Custodians had taken up position around the entrance to the flight deck, using the stanchions of the muster point as cover. 'Do they have their own secure channel?'

'They defend the Emperor's domains from all threats,' replied Balsar. 'Don't you think they might have studied the layout of this ship down to the smallest detail before they ever set foot on it?'

Noriz tried to push him aside but he resisted, thrusting away the captain's hand. He snapped off a shot with his pistol towards the Custodians and drew his chainsword.

'I am a Space Marine, captain. Not a bystander.'

The two sides fought to a stalemate in the next few seconds, with neither the Custodians willing to give ground nor the Imperial Fists wishing to bring to bear the full force of their attack for fear of maiming or killing the Emperor's guardians. When another of Arcatus' warriors joined the defence, Noriz signalled for his warriors to withdraw into the surrounding galleries.

'This is not going to work,' Balsar said.

'Perhaps we should just throw you out of the voidlock,' suggested Vindar. He sounded sincere. 'You'll be fine, Librarian, I'm sure.'

Balsar frowned, thoughtfully. 'That's not such a–'

Noriz silenced him. 'We are not throwing you out of a voidlock. Vindar, slow advance. I want it to seem that you are trying to take the launch bay. We'll send more squads your way when we see them.'

'You're leaving?' said the sergeant.

'A lesson from our companions from Deliverance.' Noriz cocked a look at Balsar, the smile apparent in his voice. 'Be other than where the enemy believes you to be.'

'The First Axiom of Stealth,' he replied. 'Indeed, I think I've been cooped up with you Imperial Fists for too long. You've dulled my Raven Guard wits.'

Vindar moved to the corner of the junction. 'We'll drag every Custodian into the fight, captain. Surround them.'

'No.' Balsar shook his head. 'Give them a route to leave by. If you cut off all retreat then they'll fight to the death – you'll leave them no choice. Leave a chink in your armour, and let them exploit the mistake.'

'You Ravens are certainly sneaky,' said the sergeant. He received a nod from Noriz, confirming the plan.

With a shout, Vindar and a handful of his battle-brothers rounded the corner, firing on the move. They were met immediately by return fire from the Custodians.

Balsar turned to Noriz. 'So. Where do we head?'

'Where are they?' Noriz hissed. The pair crossed one of the upper galleries, taking a circuitous route to the launch bays on the opposite side of the vessel, as far from the Imperial Fists' attack as possible.

Again Balsar felt the temptation to extend his preternatural senses, to search the ship for his adversaries. As he and Noriz dashed along the corridor and pounded up a stairwell – they avoided the conveyors out of concern that the Custodians had some means of monitoring their activation – the former Librarian had an almost physical desire to unleash his power. He was like an adult human competing against a child, holding back their true strength in order to present an even contest. He gritted his teeth.

‘I swore to the primarch that I would abide by the Edict of Nikaea,’ he said. ‘Only Malcador can release me from that.’

‘A shame. We could use a psychic augur. It would make this a lot easier.’

‘And it would be nothing at all if you would simply order your men to gun down these Custodians!’

‘I take your point. We each must live by our code and honour, then.’

‘A code that this war has stretched to breaking, captain. Now more than ever, we must hold dear the values that separate us from the traitors. Fraternity, loyalty, obedience.’

‘Obedience?’ Noriz almost laughed. ‘If that is true, why resist the will of the Custodians?’

‘When I have a little more time, I’ll be sure to paraphrase one of Lord Corax’s lectures for you, on the difference between obedience and subservience.’

They rounded onto a landing and, after a brief survey in both directions, headed into the corridor adjoining it. They had gone no more than twenty metres when a blast door wheezed down ahead of them, shutting off the route before them.

Noriz cursed. ‘Arcatus turns my own ship against me!’

‘He must have overridden the servitor protocols…’

They turned and headed back to the stair, but a golden-armoured figure stepped into view ahead of them, about fifty metres distant. It was Arcatus himself, resplendent in his hand-forged battleplate. His impassive mask regarded the pair for just a split second before his spear spat bolt shells down the corridor towards them.

Noriz threw himself into Balsar and the two of them tumbled out of the line of fire, clattering across the deck. In the quiet that followed, the clang of armoured boots on metal approached, swift but steady. Arcatus was not so rash as to run headlong after his prey. Doubtless he was already summoning his warriors to close the net once more.

‘Enough,’ whispered Balsar, shrugging off Noriz’s weight. He rose to a crouch, pistol and chainsword at the ready.

‘No killing,’ insisted Noriz, holding out a warning hand. ‘Our code, remember?’

‘We’ll overpower him,’ promised Balsar. ‘We can thin their numbers, and then I can get away. How long until the boarding party–’

He never finished his question. Arcatus appeared, guardian spear raised for the attack.

His first burst of fire sparked from Noriz’s armour as the captain hurled himself forwards, bolt pistol raised, his power sword still in its scabbard. He crashed a gauntleted fist across the faceplate of Arcatus’ helm, and in return the Custodian struck the haft of his spear into the captain’s arm, jarring the pistol from his grip.

Balsar joined his kinsman, his chainsword snarling into life as he swung for Arcatus’ leg. *Only a wounding blow*, he told himself. *Unlikely to be fatal for a Custodian.*

Arcatus stepped quickly, pulling his leg back even as he jabbed the butt of his guardian spear towards Balsar’s throat. The Raven Guard dodged the attack at the expense of his balance, and in the heartbeat it took to right himself, Arcatus had reversed his grip and swung his blade in retort.

Noriz drove the blow aside, smashing his shoulder under the arm of the Custodian. He tried to lift him, to turn the embrace into a throw, but Arcatus turned his weight to his advantage, flipping Noriz away. With a crack of armour, the Imperial Fist slammed into the wall and fell to the floor.

Arcatus focused on Balsar, thrusting the guardian spear at his prey, feinting first to the left before slashing from the right. Balsar’s hastily raised chainsword caught the gleaming blade and, for a moment, sparks erupted like a fountain of fire. The chainsword lost, cleaved into pieces of whirling metal and ceramite, its chain-linked teeth scattering across the deck in a shower of white-hot, molten droplets.

Balsar fired. Point-blank, he emptied his bolt pistol into Arcatus’ face.

At least, he attempted to. The first two shots rang from the Custodian’s helm with blossoms of detonation, but Arcatus veered and swayed with incredibly agility, one moment in front of the Raven Guard, the next alongside him, smashing an elbow into the side of his head.

He stumbled, turned the fall into a roll and dived aside as the cracking head of the guardian spear seared into the deck grille where he had been a

second before. Without time to catch his thoughts, he threw himself under the next blow and aimed a kick at the Custodian's knee, cracking the shining auramite there.

The Custodian staggered back, slowed for the first time.

In the space this allowed him, Balsar jumped to his feet and drew his combat knife.

Behind the Custodian, Noriz rose up and thundered a double-handed blow into the back of Arcatus' head. The Custodian turned at the next punch, catching it on his vambrace, thrusting one-handed with his guardian spear. The point crashed through Noriz's plastron, splintering the armour and disrupting flesh as it drove through fused ribs and vital organs.

The Imperial Fist twitched on the halberd, fingers spasming and head jerking as he fell away, dull blood already clotting from the wound.

Seeing Noriz's body fall, the trail of ruptured viscera that trailed from his broken plate, set Balsar into motion before he fully understood what he had just witnessed.

He seized Arcatus with a roar, wrapping an arm about his neck and driving his knife towards the grille of his helm. But the Custodian was too quick, turning his head so that the blade shrieked from the armoured visor, leaving a finger-width welt in the metal. Balsar drove a foot into the back of Arcatus' wounded knee, forcing him down with all his weight, his opponent unable to bring the spear to bear in time.

Pulling harder, Balsar grunted and snarled as he constricted his arm tighter and tighter, twisting Arcatus' head sideways and back. Gauntleted fingers scrabbled at the Raven Guard's faceplate. A thumb jabbed backwards like a dagger, breaking his left lens, missing his eye by a fraction to bruise against the reinforced bone of his brow. Even so, the momentary weakening of Balsar's grip was enough for the Custodian to free himself from the grapple, abandoning his weapon to get two hands on the Raven Guard's arm to throw him over a shoulder.

Enraged, Balsar slammed his knife backhanded, slashing the point across the other warrior's gorget. As the momentum spun him around, the Raven Guard propelled himself headlong into his foe, smashing his forehead into the weakened visor. The Custodian's helmet split open, falling between them as he staggered back, bloody drool bubbling from his nose and mouth.

Lashing the knife towards his opponent's exposed face, Balsar struck again and again, opening up a wound across the Custodian's cheek, cutting

the top off his right ear. Arcatus backed away, raised hands fending off the next flurry of attacks as he regained his senses.

And it was at that moment that Balsar knew he could not win.

He had taken his best shot and it had not been enough. He could only be victorious now if he tapped into his *true* abilities.

Psychic energy coursed into the Librarian. Eyes burning with golden light, he held up his fists, black flames wreathing his gloves. A nimbus of power shone from his psychic hood, bathing the walls and floor with cerulean light.

Arcatus stared at him, snatching up his guardian spear from the floor. Balsar would have expected anger, hatred, perhaps even resignation, but he was not prepared for the look he saw in the Custodian's eyes.

It was disappointment. Maybe even pity.

And in that gaze he saw again the black eyes of Corax as he had dismissed Balsar, convinced that the psyker was tainted in some way. The words the Librarian and his primarch had uttered came back to him in that moment.

'Very well. You will go to the Sigillite and receive his judgement in person. Your brothers are under ban of their powers again. Any use of them without specific order will be a capital offence. Am I clear?'

'Absolutely, my lord.'

A code. His honour. His oath.

Balsar reined in his rage. The flames guttered and died as he sank to his knees, the gleam of psychic power fading from his gaze.

Arcatus loomed over him, bloodied but unbowed. He took up the spear in both hands and swung.

The blade of the spear crashed against the bulkhead just above Balsar's head, showering him with hot sparks but otherwise leaving him unharmed. The Custodian let the weapon drop from his grip. He lifted his hand and spoke into the vox-link built into the vambrace of his right arm.

'This is Arcatus. Codeword "Disciple". Cease operations immediately and return to quarters.' He looked down at the Librarian. 'Balsar Kurthuri of the Nineteenth Legion, will you submit to me, to face the judgement of Malcador?'

Confused, Balsar looked back and nodded.

'I will.'

The Sigillite waited for them in an austere chamber somewhere in the depths of the Imperial Palace. Balsar had no idea where they were. He had been sedated for much of the journey.

With Malcador were two of the Sisters of Silence, clad in ceremonial armour, their faces veiled. Balsar's skin and mind itched in the presence of the anti-psykers, but Malcador seemed unaffected. If anything the Null-maidens seemed to be keeping *their* distance from him. Despite their warp-dampening presence, Balsar could feel the power emanating from the First Lord of Terra, so powerful that the warding of the Silent Sisterhood was not enough to contain it. It lapped against the edges of his consciousness, laid bare before them.

The Sigillite regarded him impassively for several minutes.

'Balsar Kurthuri – you must forgive me for the severity of the test you have endured. The death of Captain Noriz is most regrettable. Lessons will be learned from this.'

Balsar said nothing. His jaw worked silently.

Malcador nodded in understanding.

'Again, you have my apologies. But the strength of will you have shown under extreme duress, not to mention considerable physical prowess, is one of the qualities I seek. The Librarius of the Legions were full of powerful psykers, many of them more capable than you in that regard. But it is temperament, loyalty and a good degree of stubbornness that make the finest warriors. Rest assured I will send word, if I can, to Lord Corax. You will not be returning to the Raven Guard, but I have no doubt you will continue to serve with distinction, nonetheless.'

'Serve who?' Balsar asked.

There came a brief surge of psychic power that caused the Sisters of Silence to stiffen, and a door in the far wall slid open to reveal a warrior in Mark VI battleplate. The armour was the unadorned grey of bare ceramite, free of all sigils and livery, and crowned with a finely wrought psychic hood. Wincing at the presence of the Null-maidens, the Space Marine stepped into the room.

'This is Brother Umojen, Balsar,' said the Sigillite, turning away. 'He will explain everything.'

VALERIUS

Gav Thorpe

‘Vice-Caesari, we have massive contact reports in sectors three through five!’

Marcus Valerius turned to the tribune commanding the scanner array of the *Contemptuous*.

‘This isn’t a scouting mission, sir,’ the young man continued. ‘It’s a breakthrough!’

‘Show me, Severus.’

The tribune keyed several runes, redirecting his display to a portion of the main screen of the Capitol Imperialis’ command deck. The schematic showed a line of hills running south-east, curving back to the north with a broad river running beside them. Tracker icons moved west across the ridge, seeming to multiply as Marcus watched.

Three black runes blinked into existence among the red.

‘Titans,’ said Marcus, keeping his voice calm despite the sudden heavier thud of his heart. ‘Classification?’

The tribune looked to his companion at the communications bank. ‘Recon units in the area?’

The other junior officer spoke quickly into his mouthpiece and nodded. Glancing back at the display Marcus saw a platoon of the Therion Cohort’s leading pioneer company detach and race towards the enemy. Their six-wheeled transports made light work of the grassy plains, and they would quickly cover the distance.

Several minutes passed as they waited for the scouts to sight the enemy Titans.

‘Incoming communiqué from the *Iron General*, Vice-Caesari,’ said the communications officer.

‘To my bead, Ruricius.’ As he waited, Marcus located the sigil for other Capitol Imperialis at the far end of the Therion line, three kilometres distant. It had stopped, along with the tank and infantry transports escorting the super-heavy mobile fortress.

‘Brother, are you seeing this?’

‘Yes, Antonius, I am. Why are you not advancing in formation?’

‘This is a full offensive, Marcus! We’re right in front of it, and you want to advance?’

‘If we continue forward, we will engage their lead elements as they cross the river. It presents the best opportunity to hurt them.’

‘Sir, we have the recon reports,’ Ruricius offered.

Marcus nodded, speaking into the vox-bead. ‘Give me a moment, brother.’ He turned. ‘Yes?’

‘Three Battle Titans. Two Reaver-class, one Warlord.’

Worried muttering and whispered curses broke out across the command deck.

Marcus’ glare swept over his crew. ‘Silence in the ranks! We are soldiers of the Emperor, not gossiping commoners. Attend to your duties and await your orders.’

He looked again at the screen and then moved to the tri-dimensional hololithic map.

‘What is the terrain like over the river? How many crossings within five kilometres?’

‘Rough hillside, some marshland,’ Severus replied. ‘Two major bridges big enough for Titans, three smaller that infantry and tanks can cross.’

‘Very well. Ruricius, signal the cohort to halt.’ Marcus tapped the comm-bead in his ear. ‘Antonius? We’ll hold here for a few minutes, until the pioneers complete their sweep.’

‘And then?’

‘And then we defend or counter-attack, whichever seems prudent.’

‘Prudence suggests retreat, brother.’

Marcus bit back a retort. He had to consider the possibility that his desire to fight was not born purely out of strategic necessity.

‘Hold position,’ he said, grimly. ‘We shall see what we can divine of the Imperial Will. Await my orders, praefector.’

‘As you command.’

‘Severus, you have the deck.’

Marcus made for the secondary magazine on the upper deck, which had been converted into a small chapel for the command staff. The heavily armoured walls had once held reserve shells for the main cannon, but now there was nothing but an altar made from an upturned lasgun powercell crate covered with a retired Therion banner.

On the tattered embroidery sat a book even more worn, its pages mismatched, bound with wire through a thin cover fashioned out of a plain

ration box. Marcus knelt before the altar and laid a reverential hand upon the aquila of the banner – the symbol of the Emperor.

‘Give me strength, oh Master of Mankind,’ he prayed, ‘and guide my thoughts even as I guide my prayers to you.’

He reached for the book and read the inscription on the front, neatly copied by his own hand. *Lectitio Divinitatus. Being the Revelation of the God-Emperor and the True Nature of His Universe.*

The creak of the hatchway alerted him to the presence of another, and he turned his head to see his tribune-servant Pelon softly closing the door.

‘I heard that you had left the command deck, Vice-Caesari. Can I be of assistance?’

‘Pray with me, Pelon.’

The tribune knelt beside his master, and bowed his head to the cloth of the standard.

He whispered from the corner of his mouth. ‘For what do we pray?’

‘Guidance,’ Marcus replied.

‘You hope for a vision, then?’

‘A little insight from the Emperor would not go amiss, but I see nothing. I am about to commit our forces to a major battle...’

‘Does your experience as a commander inform that decision, Vice-Caesari? What do *you* think we should do? Is that not also the wisdom of the Emperor?’

Marcus considered the question. ‘My instinct is to attack. We should meet the enemy as they attempt the river crossing. We are outmatched in numbers and firepower, but the enemy cannot bring either to bear in one place until they have crossed the water. It is imperative that we act now. The Emperor has delivered us to *this* time and place for *this* reason – it cannot be coincidence that we came upon *this* beset world, daring the guns of orbit to land just days before *this* enemy incursion against the flank of the Imperial advance. There is method here, a sacred design.’

‘Quite so, Vice-Caesari.’

Marcus directed an inquisitive glare at his companion.

‘Do I sense doubt, Pelon?’ he asked, gesturing to the *Lectitio Divinitatus*. ‘Perhaps you think this is all a lie, also? That my visions were not a gift from Him?’

‘Not at all, Vice-Caesari! On my life, I swear I am one of the faithful!’

Marcus could see the conflict in the young tribune's expression. 'You have served me well for many years, Pelon. Speak your mind now, openly, as one of the faithful to another.'

'We...' Pelon began, weighing his words carefully. 'We've been given a marvellous insight, *Marcus*, but we mustn't abuse it. Your gift is a blessing, to be sure. But it isn't a master-vox to turn on and off, demanding that the Emperor shine His light into your own darkness, on a whim.' He picked up the holy book and placed it in Marcus' hands. 'This is the guidance He has given us. Find strength and wisdom in its pages. Do not demand answers.'

Marcus looked at Pelon for some time, dumbfounded by this rare insight.

'Thank you, Pelon. It is true that the Emperor speaks to us in many ways. Perhaps He even commanded your tongue to deliver His message to me.'

'I... I have other duties, preparations...' Pelon stammered. He did not seem particularly keen on the idea of the divine presence using him at its vessel. 'With your permission, Vice-Caesari?'

Marcus nodded and Pelon departed quickly, leaving him alone in the shrine.

In truth, it had been a moment of weakness that had brought him here, seeking confirmation of what he already knew. Lord Corax of the Raven Guard had despatched the Therion Cohort here, to the vicinity of Beta-Garmon, for one reason alone: to die quickly in battle. That much was plain for Marcus to see.

But this too was undoubtedly part of the Emperor's plan, enacted through his primarch gene-son. Who was Marcus Valerius to seek any other path, out of petty fear or human ignorance? They would lay down their lives, and smite Horus with their sacrifice.

Emboldened by this thought, Marcus rose, the holy book in his hand. It would be a glorious martyrdom, indeed.

All eyes turned as he re-entered the command deck.

'Ruricius, full broadcast to the whole cohort,' Marcus commanded. He spoke into the vox-bead once more. 'Brothers and sisters of Therion, sons and daughters of the Emperor. We come upon the field at a momentous time. We must take courage from the fact that we act in His name, perform His will and fight His battles. The enemy to our front, coming upon us in great force, could turn the tide of this war against the Throneworld.'

Alert sirens rang out. Severus spun at his station.

‘The enemy Titans have spotted us,’ the tribune called out. ‘Sensor locks detected!’

Marcus Valerius did not falter. ‘There will be no retreat. We fight to the last breath and bullet and las-bolt. Our faith is our shield. We are holy warriors this day, imbued with the majesty of Terra’s saviour. We might ask why, *why* has the Emperor placed us here, to die today? It matters not – only that *He* has called upon us. We fight today because we are the only ones who can make this stand. We fight because we are the Imperial Army!’

He found his place before the immense strategic display. He kissed the cover of the *Lectitio Divinitatus*.

‘The Emperor is with us. Attack!’

The shriek of the proximity alarms and targeting sirens made it impossible to think, added to the thunder of guns and the constant flash of fire beyond the viewports.

Marcus stormed over to Magos Diedriax at the systems interface panel.

‘Shut off that noise!’ he bellowed. ‘We’ve got a Titan, fifty tanks and three companies of legionaries bearing down on us. I think we *know* we’re in danger by now.’

Diedriax nodded and attended to his station. The wailing swiftly ceased, the silence of its passing almost as disorienting as the shrill alarms had been. The growl of the engines and the thump of tank shells and rolling artillery detonations intruded once more.

Something impacted on the void shields, scattering ruddy sparks across the viewports. Marcus gritted his teeth, staring at the flickering tactical overlays.

‘Third and Fourth Armoured Companies to link with the *Iron General* and concentrate on the surviving Reaver. I want infantry platoons digging in to create a flank buttress on the right, artillery division to move bombardment to creeping barrage ahead of our advance.’

Twenty-three thousand men and women of Therion had left with the Vice-Caesari. Two transports had been lost in the warp transit, and more had fallen once they arrived in-system; lack of a warship escort had left them vulnerable to traitor frigates and destroyer squadrons.

Orbital battle and the drop itself had reduced them to roughly fifteen thousand on the surface, along with nearly a thousand armoured vehicles and – Emperor be praised! – the two Capitol Imperialis.

They had done well.

Two of the Titans had been destroyed as they crossed the bridges, while the *Contemptuous* and its attendant columns of tanks had rained death upon the Space Marines trying to engage the Therion Cohort. Their intelligence no doubt a day old, the lead elements from the Sons of Horus had sacrificed speed for armour and firepower, and yet still they had been poorly equipped to deal with the shields and heavy cannons of the giant command vehicles. Faced with this unexpected resistance, they were forced back to the river to await the support of their larger war engines.

Now they came again, behind Mastodons and Land Raiders, and from the shadow of the last Titan their Predator tanks peeled away to engage the Therion companies.

'Keep up the pressure,' Marcus ordered. 'It is imperative that we do not allow the enemy to gain momentum.'

He focused on Ruricius.

'Any reply from our neighbours on the line? Is anyone else responding to the attack?'

'Nothing from the Salamanders or the Demetrian regiments, Vice-Caesari.'

A chime on the command vox drew his attention. He hailed his brother once more.

'Antonius.'

'Brother, we are being encircled! I need to withdraw and concentrate fire on the remaining Titan!'

'No, you will hold until the end. You are the anchor for our whole position, Antonius – if you step back, we all must. The Titan is your priority, you must bring it down. No other considerations.'

There was a moment of hesitation. Marcus could imagine the concerns running through his brother's thoughts, and sought to stem any doubts before they manifested.

'We spoke of this before, and said all that needed to be said. We could have disobeyed Corax's command and disappeared into the cold void, but we chose not to. We wear the red, brother. Blood for the Emperor. Do not dishonour our ancestors today.'

'Does the Emperor see us fight for Him? Tell me, Marcus, is He really a god*?'*

'He is, Antonius. He is our lord and protector. Through our deaths shall His dominion be ensured.'

The *Contemptuous* shook under the impact of more enemy ordnance, and a new warning alarm signalled the overload of their last void shield generator.

‘I must attend to the battle, Antonius. Die well and your soul will live forever.’

‘Die well, Vice-Caesari.’

There was no more time to consider his family, Therion or his part in the wider war. Flurries of heavy shells fell upon the cohort, accompanied by massed Whirlwind missile salvoes and the blaze of autocannons. To the north, the Reaver Titan duelled with the *Iron General*, its turbo-laser excoriating the void shields of the Capitol Imperialis even as its own defences were pounded by cannons and weapon batteries.

The speartip of the Sons of Horus slid into the Therion Cohort, a blade aimed for the heart – for Marcus Valerius himself, perhaps? The deck shuddered underfoot as the barrage continued, almost lost beneath the incessant ring of explosions and las-strikes against the exposed hull. Legionary transports were all around, disgorging hundreds of warriors into the path of the advancing mobile fortress.

‘Boarders!’ Ruricius cried. ‘Boarders reported at the access ramps!’

But Marcus’ eyes were fixed on the Reaver as its reactor went critical. The bright flare engulfed the *Iron General* as well, the two combatants dying in each other’s embrace.

Severus looked up at him from the controls, his face split by a wide grin. ‘Vice-Caesari! We have movement from the Salamanders. They are coming to contain the breakthrough!’

Marcus nodded. The nearest forces from the XVIII Legion were still twenty kilometres away. Too far to stop the inevitable demise of the Therion Cohort.

Even so, it was good to know that he had been right. The Emperor had placed them in harm’s way for good reason. The Salamanders and others would respond, hold the flank and keep the hope of the remaining loyalists alive.

Ruricius pulled off his headset. ‘Multiple boarding parties, Vice-Caesari,’ he reported, with an air of finality. ‘A hundred or more hostiles, moving level by level.’

Marcus turned. ‘Diedriax? All is ready?’

The magos nodded.

‘Then do it. Overload the reactor.’

As the countdown began, Marcus knelt in silent prayer upon the command deck, the *Lectitio Divinitatus* clasped to his chest. Others amongst the crew followed his lead.

He heard muffled boltgun fire from the level below. Armoured fists hammering against the reinforced door. The rasp and clatter of a chainsword on the metal.

He closed his eyes. His faith was his shield.

The driver’s request for orders, followed by the squeal of track-brakes, drew Calsar Veonid’s attention to the visual feed from the front of his Executioner tank. The hillside road dropped away a few metres ahead. The Imperial Army colonel unbuckled himself, and moved up through the top hatch for a better view.

He could see half a kilometre of devastation, an immense crater focused around the tangled remains of a Capitol Imperialis mobile fortress. The ground had been riven by an immense detonation, the banks of the depression littered with the still burning remains of traitor tanks. There were renegade militia among them, and armoured vehicles in the livery of the Sons of Horus.

The carcasses of two Titans were slumped amidst the ruin of the traitor force beside the river. He saw nothing alive.

‘Move us in,’ he murmured. ‘Slowly.’

The column followed after them, tracks skidding across the scorched ground, and a cloud of ash and dust joined the billow of exhaust fumes. The vox hissed for several seconds, and then crackled into the voice of Lieutenant Vaskk.

‘There must be more than a hundred wrecks out there. Did the Salamanders do this?’

‘No, the axis of their counter-attack was further north,’ Calsar replied, examining the blackened hull of a Land Raider as they passed. It was buckled from heavy shelling. ‘I think the Capitol Imperialis did this.’

‘On its own?’

The colonel lifted his magnoculars and looked past the pile of broken armour plate, mangled track housings and twisted columns of the immense chassis. Lines of other wrecks and mounds of charred corpses were piled up the far slope, and beyond.

‘I don’t think so. Someone counter-attacked before the Salamanders.’

‘Who, then?’

‘No idea. So many regiments thrown together, all over the Beta-Garmon warzone – I don’t think even high command could tell you *who* is *where* these days. But someone took it upon themselves to face the Sons of Horus’ attack, whatever the cost.’

From the positioning of the traitor vehicles, the mobile fortress had clearly been the centre of the last assault.

‘These traitor scum would have had us, if they hadn’t been delayed here,’ Calsar muttered. ‘Shame there’s nobody left to thank.’

The column moved into the shadow of the super-heavy, fitful flames from broken fluid links and gas exchangers still smouldering in the depths. Something caught his gaze – the tattered remnants of a red-and-gold banner. Nothing much could be seen of the design, no clue to the identity of the soldiers that had borne it into battle.

‘Contact!’ the cupola gunner called out, racking his heavy bolter as something moved amidst the wreckage.

Calsar squinted, then raised his hand sharply. ‘Wait! Hold your fire!’

A man staggered out into the open, almost naked but for a few scraps of his breeches. His skin was burned, cuts on his chest and arms where he had raised his hands against some close-by detonation.

He looked up at the tanks, clasping a dangle of red rag in one hand.

Calsar clambered out of the turret for a closer look. ‘Who are you?’ he demanded.

The stranger looked around.

‘I... I don’t rightly remember,’ he mumbled.

‘What regiment?’

‘Forgive me, it’s all a bit fuzzy. And could you speak up? I think I’ve gone a little deaf.’

Calsar’s patience was wearing thin. He didn’t have time for this. ‘What. Happened. Here?’

‘A battle, I expect,’ the stranger replied with a shrug. ‘That doesn’t really matter now – there is something important, something I have to tell you.’

The colonel stared at the devastation that stretched in all directions. ‘How could anyone survive this?’ he muttered. ‘It’s incredible...’

The man thrust forward a sheaf of loosely tied pages, their edges scorched. There was handwriting on the tattered cover but a dirty, broken-nailed thumb obscured the words.

‘No, my friend. This is a *miracle*.’

Marcus Valerius of the Therion Cohort

THE EMBER WOLVES

Rob Sanders

The void rumbled at the arrival of the Dark Mechanicum. Monstrous coffin-ships thundered into the backwater systems of the Gorgonopsii Maestrale, glimmering with the fell light of corruption. Each transported tainted constructs – tech-pledged to the Warmaster. They were packed with traitor cyborgs of the Thallaxii cohorts. They carried the fallen god-machines of the Legio Audax.

The Ember Wolves. Death, by any other name.

At the heart of the Maestrale lay the shabby little hive world of Absolom. It was here, in the shadow of ancient hives, that the towering war machines of the Legio Castigatra made their stand. Overconfident and untried, they had been drawn together with other legions as part of the newly formed Adeptus Titanicus. The loyalist Titans marched forth under the banners of the false Fabricator General of Terra and met Horus Lupercal's forces, god-machine to god-machine.

The hive world shook with landing Titans, brought down with rancid expediency from macro-carriers achieving low orbit. The dunes of the surrounding ash wastes trembled, while the crooked spires and looming accretions of the hives fell and crashed into the cityscape below. With ear-splitting horns of arrival, cybernetic shock troops spilled from landing transports. Screams spread through the shanties as Thallaxii soldiers made their maniac way through the corrugated townships, wildly gunning down the hive-worlders. But the true terror came with the first steps of the god-machines, a cacophonous thunder that shook such structures to scrap and crushed families underfoot. Colossal weaponry boomed to life – power converters filled the air with the hum of static, while the heavy metal clunk of loading mechanism echoed through the canyons between the hives.

By the time the Emperor-class Titans of the Legio Castigatra arrived to intercept the traitor machines and retake the landing sites, the Ember Wolves had long been lying in wait.

Balthus Voltemand glowered in his command throne. His battle-scarred face looked like a topographical map in the red of the canopy lighting. As well as being commander of *Canis Ulteriax*, he was the ranking princeps amongst the Warhound Scout Titans of Battle-Pack Karnassia. Like others of the pack, Voltemand's machine had once borne another name: a proto-Gothic

moniker, little more now than a lousy, Terran curse word, that no longer had any meaning for the Warmaster's battle-pledged.

The pack had taken position amongst the hyperstacks and fat chimneys of Hive Septus. The billowing, metallic clouds of industry cloaked the area, hiding even the towering forms of the battle-pack's six Warhounds. They listened to hives in uproar, and the thunderous weaponry of loyalist machines and the Warmaster's finest exchanging distant fire.

While they had lain in wait, much had happened. Mechanicum-allied Thunderbolts on a bombing run ran afoul of barrage balloons surrounding Karnassia's landers. The hive spire, with its palaces and grand ballrooms, suffered the quake of passing god-machines before toppling down the side of the monstrous city. With aircraft plummeting through the chemical smog and colossal chunks of masonry raining down after them, the Ember Wolves held their nerve and position.

When *Tantorus Magnificat* rounded the hive, the Warmonger's stride taking it through the decimated shanties, Voltemand knew that he had acquired a target worthy of his battle-pack.

He stared through the cockpit eyes of *Canis Ulteriax*. He scanned for heat signatures, for echolocational feedback and movement among the cycling visual spectra. He didn't need them. Overhead, between chimney-spumes of rancid smoke, Voltemand had thought he saw the jagged cityscape of the hive itself moving, but it was not. It was the fortress towers of *Tantorus Magnificat*'s hunched carapace emerging from the crooked confusion of accretions and spires. The princeps knew the mighty Titan of old. He had fought both alongside the veteran machine at Vorda Corona and against it at Belisarr Alpha and Phendrick's World. But he had never had the opportunity to actually *engage* the Warmonger, and wasn't going to waste this one, now.

A grating ping reverberated across the cockpit enclosure.

'I have an auspex contact,' Moderati Shenk reported from his forward throne, his voice a monotonous drone.

'You have more than that,' Voltemand said with a wolfish smile.

'Is that…' Kordella began, leaning over from her station.

'It is,' the princeps told her with relish. '*Tantorus Magnificat*. The False Mechanicum of Terra wishes to test us, and we welcome the challenge. The Ember Wolves do not shirk from the fight. For we are ferocity made metal. The doom of mightier machines. We bring gods to their armoured knees.'

‘Powering up,’ Shenk said, rerouting automotive energies to the Warhound’s dormant magna-hydraulics and legs. ‘Waking the enginseer.’

Voltemand banged his fist against the runebank wall behind his throne, hoping to rouse the cantankerous construct and his malformed servitors in the compartment beyond. ‘Tell that malingering priest to be ready. We stride into battle. Dark destiny awaits us in the thunder to come.’

‘Weapon systems online,’ Kordella reported as the clunk of the Vulcan mega-bolter’s autofeeds rumbled through the superstructure. ‘Awaiting your command. Ursus claw ready, harpoon primed.’

‘Very good, moderati,’ Voltemand said. While the Warhound Titans of the Ember Wolves carried different primary weapons for tactical variety, the right arm of each was mounted with a spear-and-cable weapons system, designed to ensnare and bring down greater prey. ‘Shenk, open a channel. All Warhounds of Karnassia.’

‘Affirmative,’ the moderati said. ‘You are patched through, princeps.’

‘Harken, my brothers,’ Balthus Voltemand called across the crackling channel. ‘Berate your crew and stir the monstrous spirit of your machines. The wait is over. The time has come. Prey worthy of our efforts draws near.’

‘Tantorus Magnificat?’ a voice like churned gravel ventured back across the channel. ‘*Then the honour shall be mine*.’

It was Grental Thrax, princeps of *Rubella Mortem*. His Warhound, ‘the Red Death’, had the greatest number of god-kills in the pack and, but for the fact that he was a disagreeable maniac, would have led the six machines of Karnassia in the hunt. In appointing a princeps primus, more tactical cogitators had prevailed and Balthus Voltemand and *Canis Ulteriax* had been given the honour instead. Across the open channel, Voltemand could hear Thrax threatening his moderati crew with the sceptre that he always carried, and the sound of the Red Death’s plasma blastgun priming.

‘There is no honour without victory,’ Balthus Voltemand growled back, ‘and there is no victory without the pack. You will take your place, princeps, amongst the Ember Wolves. As it has been. As it is. As it will always be.’

As the voices of other commanding officers resounded through the vox, Voltemand heard Thrax grunt an acknowledgement.

‘Form up, you Warhounds of Horus,’ Voltemand ordered. ‘Ready your weapons and call upon the savagery of your machine-spirits.’

The princeps primus thrust his arms forward and sat bolt upright in his throne. Through the Titan manifold, *Canis Ulteriax* answered. Skulking like

some low beast of the plain, the Warhound held its armoured head at a hunch, while its ursus claw and mega-bolter were raised up and ready to fire. The Scout Titan's clawed feet pounded through the shanties, flattening ramshackle structures and turning dunes to clouds of pounded ash. The clunk of heavy metal servos and pistoning pump of magna-hydraulics echoed through the acidic smoke clouds of brute industry. The hunters of Karnassia followed, picking their way through the destruction after *Canis Ulteriax – Vulpium Nox* and *Lupa Laudator* following Voltemand's lead, while the Warhounds *Pugnax Principio* and *Rapacia Rex* fell into flanking positions either side of the Red Death.

'Moderati Shenk,' Voltemand called. 'My compliments to the magos reductor. Inform him that the blessed ruin of his Thallaxii shock troops are needed, fourth quadrant, delta-east peripheral. Tell him that the Ember Wolves are about to make a kill, and both his siege-craft and armoured cohorts are required to extract the marrow from metal bones.'

'Aye, princeps.'

Beyond, the hive shook with the arrival of the loyalist Warmonger. Structures crumbled and sub-spires toppled. The colossal Titan simply stepped *through* factory complexes, the detonations of uranic works and power stations flashing about the god-machine's armoured feet. Mushroom clouds billowed around *Tantorus Magnificat*'s monstrous form, while energy unleashed from ruptured power cores felt its way up armoured plate the thickness of a battle cruiser's hull.

'Attack pattern umbilicus,' Voltemand said as the Warhounds stalked into position. Through the rust-stained smoke and ruined architecture of the hive, the Titans took their places. Ordinarily, the movements of such mighty war machines would easily attract attention, but amongst the cascading destruction of Hive Septus and the booming advance of the Warmonger, they were all but lost.

'Come on,' the princeps primus quietly urged the loyalist Titan. 'Come and get us.'

He keyed the comm-channel on the arm of his throne.

'Tunstall, the duty is yours. Draw him on.'

Voltemand heard both the displeasure of Tunstall Haulk and Grental Thrax across the channel. The princeps primus had offered the glory to one of Thrax's close allies: Haulk's *Rapacia Rex* was about to become bait in the trap the Ember Wolves had set for *Tantorus Magnificat*. From its position

amongst the vent-scrapers of a manufactorum stack, *Rapacia Rex* levelled its turbo-lasers at the oncoming Warmonger. A well-placed beam from *Rapacia Rex* would be barely enough to wound the mighty god-machine, but it would be more than enough to get the Titan crew's attention and draw *Tantorus Magnificat* on.

'Wait,' Voltemand ordered. Something was wrong.

Moments before the air had been thick with the metallic boom of the giant's advance. *Tantorus Magnificat's* steps had crunched through structures and the unseen hivers crowding within. Explosions rippled through the path of decimation that marked its progress. Now, however, the air was still.

'Auspex!'

'The enemy Titan has come to a halt,' Shenk told his princeps. Voltemand knew that could mean only one thing. He had underestimated the Warmonger's long-range scanners.

Kordella spat. '*Tantorus Magnificat* is arming missiles.'

'Intensify forward void shields,' the princeps barked, his scarred features wrapped around a snarl. Then into the open channel he added: 'Brothers, brace yourselves.'

'Incoming!' Kordella called. A missile suddenly punched through the lead-coloured clouds. *Tantorus Magnificat* was revealed, towering above them. Its towers and hunched fortresses twinkled with lights while its right arm, bearing a multi-racked launcher, was pointed down at the Karnassia pack.

Canis Ulteriax had been facing *Lupa Laudator* when it was hit. One moment it was four hundred tonnes of armoured pugnacity, the next it was a rocketing explosion of shattered scrap. The dull thunk of shrapnel hitting *Canis Ulteriax*'s outer hull could be heard through the cockpit, and through the manifold Voltemand could feel the destruction wash over his Titan. The princeps primus knew he had to act.

'Shenk, backtrack,' Voltemand called out. The princeps thrust his left arm out. 'Kordella, answer!'

As the Warhound backed through blazing shanty dwellings, its Vulcan mega-bolter roared to life, sending a magnificent stream of magna-bore bolt shells at the loyalist Warmonger. The huge rounds plucked at the Titan's overlapping void shields, sparking sizzling ripples through the fields like stones in a lake.

The dank hive world air trembled with the blare of war-horns: *Tantorus Magnificat* would answer the challenge.

With huge steps it crashed through the shanties. The Titan moved with all the territorial urgency its colossal frame was capable of mustering. Giant weapons, ancient and bedecked with banners, were presented. Its ponderous movements swept like a gale through the smog drifting down from the chimneys of the industrial districts, clearing the filth away.

‘Come on, you glorious abomination,’ the princeps said, as *Canis Ulteriax* backed through a nest of flimsy smokestacks. ‘Again!’

As the mega-bolter gave account of itself once more, Voltemand could feel the rhythmic tremble through the Warhound’s superstructure and his command throne.

‘That’s it,’ he seethed. ‘Keep your attention on me… On me, damn it!’

As *Tantorus Magnificat* waded on, its great, racked launcher rotated with an echoing clunk.

‘Princeps,’ Shenk said, but Voltemand ignored the moderati. As the Warmonger primed a second missile for launch, Kordella turned in her throne.

‘Princeps,’ she echoed, her voice tinged with something more than just dutiful concern.

‘Hold your tongues,’ Voltemand shot back. ‘I’ll give the order when I’m ready.’

Kordella turned back, staring through the Titan’s cockpit eyes and up at the advancing mountain of plasteel and adamantium. Voltemand watched. He waited. The timing had to be right, as did the positions and angles. Upon these factors, everything depended. Engagements such as these were won or lost in seconds.

Seconds of excitement and horror, where a Titan princeps had to hold his nerve.

‘Balthus!’ Kordella called out.

‘Now, brothers of iron and fury,’ the princeps commanded, ‘brandish your claws and let slip your harpoons. This god-machine is ours for the taking.’

The first shot came from *Vulpium Nox*. Over the vox-channel, Voltemand heard Haximiliian Bettanquor roar from the command throne as his Warhound loosed its arm-mounted spear. Initially designed as grappling and boarding devices for World Eaters legionary vessels, the ursus claws were powerful Titan-hunters. *Vulpium Nox* stumbled back as the harpoon tore

away on its cable. Able to punch through the heaviest armour plating, it had little problem with the racks and tubes of the Warmonger's missile launcher.

Skewering through with an appalling screech and a ringing that hung in the air about the loyalist Titan, the claw knocked the launcher off its aim; the next missile streaked wide on a trail of rocket propellant smoke. As it struck the rust-stained rockcrete of a cooling tower, the structure was transformed into an inferno of flame and showering grit. *Canis Ulteriax* was knocked to one side by the blast but, under Moderati Shenk's control, managed to keep its footing.

Like a giant herbivore surrounded by death world predators, *Tantorus Magnificat* was trapped. Spears shot up through the thinning smoke, burying themselves in the target with a shearing prang. Cable spools ran. Lines dragged taut.

The shanties shook with the tremble of gears and automotive engines. Power cores roared and magna-hydraulics struggled. The splayed-claw feet of Battle-Pack Karnassia's Warhounds scraped across the ground, shearing through corrugated complexes as the Warmonger tried to escape their clutches. Trapped in a web of taut cables, *Tantorus Magnificat* tried to heave its way free.

'Hold it!' Balthus Voltemand called across the open channel. 'Call upon everything your machines have! The Warmonger is ours now. Don't let it move. Don't let it breathe…'

The Ember Wolves hauled back at the behemoth, bracing it between them. Titanic weaponry mounted upon the Warmonger's arms and carapace fired off wildly, attempting to blast its tormenters to oblivion. Instead, all it achieved was turning the settlement and surrounding industrial zone into a mess of smouldering craters, into which the Warhounds almost slipped.

'Heave!' Voltemand called to his brothers as *Canis Ulteriax* stalked back in to join the fight. Harpoon heads worried at armour plating and cables sang their high-pitched song. The hunched backs of the Karnassia machines steamed with the effort. Giant servos whined and hydraulics hissed as the Warhound Scout Titans scrabbled ever backwards through the ash dunes and wreckage.

Tantorus Magnificat's great, bellowing war-horn sounded once again. This time it seemed almost panicked. This time it was almost in rage. Voltemand could believe that it might be calling out for aid.

'Auspex sweep,' he commanded. 'Long range.'

He didn’t need it, however. Through the cockpit eyes of the Warhound, he saw the forward void shields flash and ripple with kinetic impacts. Squinting, the princeps primus could see the heat signatures of tank formations out on the ash wastes. He could make out Baneblades and armoured personnel carriers lurching across the dunes towards them.

‘Hivers,’ Kordella informed her princeps. ‘Planetary defence contingents.’

Voltemand thrust out his arm to the side. The contempt was clear on his face. Shenk and Kordella were busy at their stations as the great Warhound heaved around. With a grunt of brute satisfaction, the princeps watched as *Canis Ulteriax*’s mega-bolter unleashed its firepower. Bolts tore up through the wasteland, turning Chimera transports and their hive soldiers to chopped wreckage. Even super-heavy tanks were turned back or aside by the relentless storm of shells, skidding this way and that through the ash as their tracks thrashed for better traction. Several mauled vehicles exploded as the bolt streams hit critical systems, fuel lines and the like, while others were knocked down the sides of the dunes and rolled onto their backs to present their vulnerable underbellies. As hive world soldiers and tank crews, bloody and broken, abandoned their smashed vehicles, they were met by Legio Audax-allied Dark Mechanicum transports. Cybernetic shock troops poured from troop bays. Thallaxii warriors, impassive and indomitable, moved through the swirling ash, blasting hivers to splattered shreds with streams of energy from their lightning guns.

‘Princeps,’ Kordella warned, drawing Voltemand’s attention to the besieged Warmonger Titan.

‘The honour will be mine,’ Grental Thrax announced, as the Red Death hauled at *Tantorus Magnificat*. His harpoon had found a high target and the Warhounds’ relentless efforts had almost managed to topple the Titan. *Pugnax Principio*’s plasma blastgun hammered brightly blazing spheres into the Warmonger’s void shields. Each blast was like a small sun and the fusillade swiftly overpowered the generators, and the shields began to collapse in a riot of colour and spent energies.

‘Forward!’ Voltemand ordered. ‘Enough of these trifles.’

‘But, princeps…’ Shenk said, his monotonous voice like a sedative in the confines of the cockpit.

‘Do as I say,’ Voltemand snarled.

As *Canis Ulteriax* stalked forth at a belligerent hunch, the loyalist Warmonger lifted one mighty armoured foot. Kicking out, the foot knocked

the Warhound back into an unsteady stumble. Voltemand was almost tipped from his throne and the cables torn from his temples. Cockpit runebanks flashed and sparked. The princeps felt the pain of the Titan's wounded spirit through the manifold but, crashing back through the shanties and into the side of a cooling tower, the Warhound managed to regain its composure. Supported by the colossal rockcrete chimney, *Canis Ulteriax* shook off dust, shattered masonry and embarrassment.

'Damage report,' the princeps primus demanded. As Shenk and Kordella struggled with their sparking stations, Voltemand smacked his fist against the back wall of the cockpit. 'Wake up, priest!'

As the two moderati read off a list detailing minor damage to locomotion drivers and some superficial malfunctions in the weapons systems, Voltemand watched *Tantorus Magnificat* fight for its life, and the lives of all those within its armoured shell. Heaving around, the Warmonger lifted *Vulpium Nox* up by the cable and off its scrambling feet, before whirling it back into the ground. As the Warhound came crashing down, it too stumbled into surrounding structures before being righted again by the tautness of its connecting cable.

The Warmonger brought its foot crashing down once more, managing to connect with *Pugnax Principio*. Unlike Voltemand's Warhound, *Pugnax Principio* was not merely knocked back. It was stamped down into the earth, the colossal *Tantorus Magnificat* bringing its full, city-block weight down on the Scout Titan. Like his brothers, Voltemand heard Princeps Phestalag and his crew die across the open channel as *Pugnax Principio* was pulverised by the much larger god-machine. Detonating beneath the armoured foot, the breached plasma reactor turned the ash and sand for a hundred metres about it to glass.

At this, the Ember Wolves found their fury once more. Held firm between *Vulpium Nox*, *Rapacia Rex* and the Red Death, the Warmonger wasn't going anywhere. Its great weaponry had been reduced to wild thunder and its automotive systems were straining. It was difficult for even a god-machine's crew to orchestrate a counter-attack when their mighty Titan was straining hard not to topple over.

As the moderati finished their damage report, Voltemand spat.

'We can fight without those secondary systems,' he said, lifting his arms to present *Canis Ulteriax*'s weaponry to the ensnared enemy. 'Engage!'

The Warhound loped forward, its Vulcan mega-bolters unleashing a continuous stream of mass-reactive fire. The remaining void shields about the Warmonger soaked up the damage, their surfaces rippling with the impacts. Voltemand roared. The Warhound charged. The torrent of magna-bore bolt shells found its way in through the collapsing shields and widening holes in *Tantorus Magnificat*'s ablative defences.

'Ammunition low,' Kordella warned. 'Seventy-five per cent depletion.'

It did not stop the princeps primus.

The plan had been his. The kill would be his. Honour was at stake.

As the Red Death continued to haul on its spear cable, Voltemand's incessant bolt stream pounded its way into a magazine compartment attached to one of *Tantorus Magnificat*'s ancient battle cannon emplacements in a lower bastion.

The blast was blinding. Twisted struts and pieces of shattered adamantium plating flew high through the air. The gunnery system to which the magazine was attached went up in a smaller, secondary explosion. Voltemand could only imagine the flame-rolling havoc that the crew of the afflicted section must have been experiencing.

'*Yes*…' the princeps hissed. The cockpit eyes had further delights for him, however. The detonation had rocked the already unbalanced Titan. With servos and magna-hydraulics in the connecting sections compromised, *Tantorus Magnificat* reluctantly gave up its fight against the Ember Wolves, and gravity itself.

'Heads up!' Grental Thrax warned as the Red Death heaved the Warmonger over. Both *Rapacia Rex* and *Vulpium Nox* backed up, letting their cables run. Voltemand watched as the Titan wavered and then began to fall.

It seemed to take an eternity. Great, weaponised limbs reached out uselessly, seemingly in slow motion. Armoured bastion-feet attempted to find their balance. The buried harpoons had done their work, however, and the fall was inevitable. Once a prize of gargantuan grace and indomitability, *Tantorus Magnificat* now looked like a snapshot of some cataclysmic accident in progress. Its slow movements appeared clumsy and ridiculous.

When the god-machine finally met the ground, it levelled the landscape beneath it.

Several more explosions rippled through the Titan's superstructure as it buckled, its ancient frame never intended to support the colossal weight of

the carapace at ninety degrees from true. Buttresses shattered, stanchions sheared through. Broken statuary and ruined glassaic rained down from the ramparts, while power generators in the industrial complexes crushed beneath its bulk flashed blinding white. Shanties were blasted away in the backwash and ash was thrown up into the air, covering the area with poisonous clouds of particulate matter.

The Warmonger's skull-like head lolled to one side. The internal lights of its left eye went dead. With a final, mournful blast of its war-horns that kicked up dust from the ground beneath its chin, *Tantorus Magnificat* fell silent.

'Yes…' Voltemand said again. Nothing was more fitting or beautiful in his Warhound's sight. 'Kordella.'

'Princeps?'

'Send word to the magos reductor. The carcass is his to strip. Tell him to unleash his Thallaxii.'

'And our orders, princeps primus?' Shenk asked.

'Power down weapons and void shields,' Voltemand said. 'Then onwards, to claim my prize.'

Canis Ulteriax found the ugly shapes of the Red Death and *Rapacia Rex* waiting. The Warhounds had disconnected their spear cables and were standing over the fallen *Tantorus Magnificat* as though it were a hunter's trophy. The *Vulpium Nox*, meanwhile, had become tangled in surrounding wreckage and its own ursus claw.

'This time, I think not,' Grental Thrax called across the vox-channel. As the dust settled and *Canis Ulteriax* approached, there seemed something savage and threatening about the way the Warhounds were carrying themselves.

'Kordella?'

'They're both running with shields up and weapons primed, my princeps.'

Voltemand stared through the cockpit eyes of his Warhound at the Karnassia Titans. He turned his head to one side, presenting the grizzled scars of his face.

'What's on your mind, Grental?' the princeps primus said. As the Warhounds stood facing one another, cohorts of Thallaxii shock troops descended upon *Tantorus Magnificat*, laying siege to the tech-guard positions within the downed Warmonger. They could have little notion that a greater battle still loomed over their heads.

‘You and your godless Titan,’ Grental Thrax came back. *‘Both of you afflicted with a cowardly soul. Neither worthy to lead this battle-pack. It is time, Balthus. Time to step aside and let worthier men and machines lead.’*

‘Princeps?’ Kordella asked, her voice hushed.

Voltemand’s lip curled. ‘Do it.’

As the Warhounds stared each other down, the moderati activated *Canis Ulteriax*’s forward void shields and re-engaged their weapons systems.

‘You’ve spent too long with the World Eaters,’ Voltemand said. ‘We’re all still sons and daughters of Mars, here. We’re all still pledged to the Warmaster, are we not?’

‘Horus,’ Grental Thrax told him, *‘like his brother Angron, is served best by strength – a quality that you lack, Balthus. You would use your brothers as bait, while standing idly by. I lead from the front. I lead by example. My victories are my own.’*

‘And yet,’ Voltemand shot back, ‘you stand over *my* prize.’

‘My brothers and I dragged the wounded beast to the ground.’

‘And who was it that wounded the god-machine?’ Voltemand demanded. ‘Who delivered the killing shot that brought this monster down? The honour is mine – as it is for all Titans felled by this battle-pack, for Karnassia is mine also. Do you hear me, Thrax? I am primus. I am the first, by right. Now, enough of our number have fallen today. Don’t add your mongrel machine to the tally. Stand your Warhound down. That goes for you too, Haulk.’

Voltemand waited. The Red Death and Haulk’s *Rapacia Rex* were unmoved, however.

Precious seconds passed.

‘Ready mega-bolter,’ the princeps primus whispered, slowly lifting his left arm.

‘Ready, princeps,’ Kordella told him.

Few were expecting what happened next. *Rapacia Rex* was suddenly knocked forward and then disappeared in a blaze of flame. Engulfed in a blinding inferno, the Warhound burned. Its reinforced shell was doused in promethium jelly that burned as hot as an armoury furnace. Inside, Tunstall Haulk and his crew roasted. *Vulpium Nox* had disentangled itself. Listening to the interchange, the Warhound had stalked up behind *Rapacia Rex* and hit it at point-blank range in the back.

Voltemand heard Grental Thrax roar over Haulk's final screams. In the silhouette of the eye-searing flame, the Red Death turned, aiming its arm-mounted turbo-laser straight at its new attacker. As the pulsing beam of energy raged into the hunched body of *Vulpium Nox*, it hit something that went supercritical within the Warhound Titan's body. As the chassis violently exploded, the cockpit followed suit – but both were engulfed in the promethium blast of the Titan's inferno cannon reservoirs.

As both the demolished *Vulpium Nox* and the Red Death vanished behind a curtain of flame, Voltemand squinted. Echolocation and visual spectra were useless. The entire area was one *big* heat signature.

'Target?' Voltemand demanded. Like her princeps, Kordella searched for the enemy Warhound.

'I've got nothing,' she told him.

'Fire anyway!' Voltemand growled, lifting his arm.

The Vulcan mega-bolter hammered a stream of rounds into the fire. As the flames died away, they could see the Red Death. Its armoured shell was black and smouldering, while its turbo-laser was pointed directly back at *Canis Ulteriax*. Its void shields had collapsed with the backwash of the explosion, and its armour plating was perforated in a hundred places.

'I have you now,' Voltemand said, aiming the mega-bolter squarely at his foe.

With a doom-laden clunk that reverberated through the Titan's superstructure, the mega-bolter's ammunition belt ran dry.

Shenk, Kordella and their princeps primus couldn't tear their eyes from the spectacle of the smouldering Red Death. Voltemand bit back a curse, and gripped the arms of his throne. 'Brace–'

The turbo-laser fired. When it did, all Voltemand knew was light and heat. For a moment, everything was cacophonous and unbearable. He tried to blink the intensity from his eyes. His nostrils stung with the chemical brume of the hive world atmosphere. All he could do was experience the agony of *Canis Ulteriax* through the manifold as its machine-spirit suffered.

As his sight returned, the princeps realised that the cockpit was open to the air. The turbo-laser beam had carved a path straight through the left-hand side of the cockpit. Shenk was gone. So too was his throne and command station.

Voltemand looked upon the Red Death with his own eyes, unaided, unclouded. He knew that Grental Thrax would be staring back from within

his own, roasted cockpit.

‘Kordella,’ Voltemand said, reaching forwards for the moderati’s shoulder. ‘Are you still with me?’

‘To the last, princeps,’ she managed through raw, blackened lips.

‘Then let us show Grental Thrax our claws,’ Voltemand said, ‘and grapple with our brother.’

Thrusting his right arm forward, he fired the ursus claw. The harpoon rocketed forth. Unswerving. Unstoppable. Balthus Voltemand punched the spear straight into the cockpit of the Red Death. As it was buried there – in and *through* the Warhound’s ugly bridge compartment – Voltemand could plainly hear the sounds of human suffering over the open channel.

Something was still alive in the cockpit, at least. The princeps hoped that it was Grental Thrax.

Tearing his arm back, Voltemand violently tore the head from the Red Death, and Thrax’s ruined body from the shattered cockpit. The whole Titan lurched forwards, the decapitated body crashing onto the stump of its neck and the muzzle of its turbo-laser, crushing whatever remains lay before it.

Settling back into his throne, Balthus Voltemand glowered at the dead Warhound.

‘I got you,’ the princeps mouthed. ‘The prize and the honour is mine.’

‘No,’ Kordella told him. It took the princeps a moment to register what she had said.

‘What?’

The moderati looked from her runebanks to her princeps before standing up from her throne. Voltemand did likewise. The pair of them looked down from their smashed cockpit. Thallaxii shock troops were no longer attacking the corpse of *Tantorus Magnificat*. They were fleeing the downed Titan, while armoured personnel carriers were thrashing their tracks back through the ash and sand.

As a princeps, Voltemand understood. ‘The reactor core?’

Kordella confirmed what her runescreen had told her with a slow nod. In a final act of defiance, the crew of the Warmonger hoped to deny the traitors the ancient god-machine. They had overloaded the power systems, sending the reactor into a critical meltdown.

Nothing would escape a blast of that size.

Not the fleeing Thallaxii. Not *Canis Ulteriax*.

Balthus Voltemand slumped back down. The Warhounds of Karnassia were no more. His command was ended. He had been beaten.

Gripping the arms of his command throne, the princeps primus watched as oblivion came for him in the unbearable light of a miniature star.

BLACKSHIELD

Chris Wraight

He had taken back his name.

That was a victory, of sorts – a measure of defiance. Now he bore it openly again, and they called him by it, and he listened to the scrape and rasp of Barbaran tongues reminding him where he had been birthed, and made, and turned.

Kho – rak. Two syllables, pronounced with the rattle of toxin-hardened throats.

Despite all else that had taken place, it felt good to have it spoken again.

Now Khorak looked out over the bridge of the *Ghogolla*, his ship, heavy and rust-spidered, fitted out for close-range actions. The menials worked below him, their faces hidden behind smeary, gas-filled face masks. The recycled air tasted faintly brackish.

One of them approached – a mortal, Narag, the ship's master, clad in XIV Legion grey, white and green, eyes lowered, fists balled in deference.

'And?' Khorak asked, pushing the pivoted command throne around on its creaking axis.

'Commander,' Narag said. 'We cannot outrun it.'

Khorak considered that. The *Ghogolla* was old, and tired. Its plasma drives creaked like stretched leather. Sooner or later they were bound to meet something faster, something that had properly weathered the storm and which could end them.

'Then we fight it,' Khorak told him.

Narag looked uncertain.

'What other option remains?' Khorak asked.

'Perhaps, on firm ground…'

Ah yes, that was still possible. They had headed to Agarvian for a reason, playing to their Legion's strengths. It might be better yet to cleave to that, cheating destruction one more time, rather than face a tilted contest in the void.

'Can we reach it, though?' Khorak mused idly, glancing at the grease-specked monitors showing forward augur scans. 'What manner of hunters are they?'

Narag did not know. It had become hard to detect the enemy from range, what with overlapped ident-markers, false flags and hidden colours. The galaxy was now a patchwork of broken allegiances, and you could only tell

truly who your opponent fought for when you looked him in the eye and watched for the twitch.

The intentions of these opponents were clear enough, though.

They were coming to kill.

Khorak spun his throne around again, pushing lazily with a scuffed boot-tip. ‘No matter. Make for Agarvian, but prepare for void-action. It will be tight, to reach sanctuary.’

‘Aye, commander,’ Narag replied with a bow. Before withdrawing, he hesitated. ‘But I will get you there,’ he added, his voice a mix of pride and resignation.

Khorak nodded. That was probably correct, though it would likely be the shipmaster’s last feat of void-craft. They were handsomely outgunned and outpowered, and it seemed somehow fitting that the tortuous fate spawned on Isstvan had caught up with them at last.

‘I believe you,’ Khorak said. ‘Now get to work.’

They ran hard. The *Ghogolla* seemed aware of its impending demise and, as if from wounded pride, dragged some vestige of its old thunderous power up from a clanking enginarium. As they were now too far from a Mandeville point to make the warp, Narag took the ship deep under the solar plane of the Leops System, shadowed all the while by their pursuer. They passed within ten thousand kilometres of the silky mass of the methane giant Hereb before breaking for the system’s heart on full burn and in towards Agarvian.

Khorak saw none of this. He trudged down to the principal hangar lodged against the leeward hull-edge, where his remaining sworn brothers waited for him in their full panoply of war – old XIV Legion plate, worn unbroken from the slaying fields of Isstvan through the years of variegated slaughter thereafter.

Out on the apron, his lieutenant, Hesch, saluted him silently, raising a stained chainsword across his shell-pocked chest. The three others took their places on the panels – Urgain, with his carbon-black volkite serpenta, Turgalla hauling a rad-launcher in both gauntlets, Lyphas loosely twisting paired chainaxes from the wrist. Khorak himself was heavier and grander than them all, weighed down by the age-pitted ceramite of Terminator armour, the edges as pale as bleached bone and scuffed with the mottle of a hundred worlds. He hefted a manreaper power scythe before him just as the first hit came in, making the chamber shake.

‘Do not gainsay this,’ Khorak warned, looking past Hesch, out to the bulk of his lone operational Stormbird *Skarvor*, already prepped on the steaming deck plates. The open void beyond was as black as a scab.

‘We could fight from here,’ said Hesch anyway, sceptical, though still respectful.

The deck shook again, then again. The enemy were finding their range, and soon the power-deprived void shields would start to fail.

Khorak gazed grimly around the cracked hangar vaults. ‘This old hull no longer gives us any advantage. Better to fight with our feet on the earth, as the Death Lord taught us.’

That brought a snort of amusement from Lyphas. Beyond them, *Skarvor*’s ramp hissed down, exposing the crew bay within. The whine of turbofans started up, making the atmosphere-bubble of the hangar flex.

‘Come, then,’ ordered Khorak, striding out towards the Stormbird. ‘As we planned it.’

But they had not planned it, not like this. The *Ghogolla* was to have been their watcher in low orbit once they reached Agarvian. For all its decrepitude, it still had manufactoria and powerplants, and once it was destroyed they would be stranded on the world below – alive, but unimaginably far from help.

Still, *alive* was the key. While their hearts still beat there was always a chance of something more.

More strikes impacted, syncopating closer, smashing through the tortured voidship’s reeling exterior. The hangar began to tilt over, its grav-generators knocked out of kilter, and arm-wide cracks snaked across the ceiling.

Skarvor lifted off, juddering badly as its old Warhawk-pattern engines worked to compensate for the rapidly changing environment. It blasted ahead, making the switch from atmospheric thrusters to void-drives even before the hangar entrance had been breached.

Around them, the *Ghogolla* slewed across the transverse, skidding through space as though kicked. Clouds of angry static burst out ahead of them, showering from the hangar’s crumbling doors as the fields clashed.

Khorak fed the last of the available power to the Stormbird, and it boosted on pure plasma, skating over the bucking rockcrete and leaving plumes of sparks where the metal grated. Something deep in the *Ghogolla* ignited, and flames surged up from the breaking deck-level, liquid and roiling.

But then they were out, bursting clear of the disintegrating shell of their home vessel and out into the vacuum beyond, spreading a smear of fire across the deep well of space. Khorak sent the gunship swinging hard over to port, down and down towards the looming gravity tug of the planet Agarvian. As they accelerated out of the exploding remnants of the *Ghogolla*, debris clanged and scraped across their ship's spine.

For a few moments, the chained explosions masked their presence. On any pursuing augur the *Skarvor* would be just one more piece of racing debris, a buttress or a deck-brace flying clear of the *Ghogolla*'s demise. That was the precious window they needed to get clear, to race ahead, to put themselves beyond the range of the enemy's guns for long enough to reach the approaching troposphere.

Khorak nudged the control column, bringing the Stormbird's trim higher, now finding the optimum line of atmospheric entry. They had seconds, no more, before the Legion gunners who had already destroyed their ship zeroed down on the new target.

Khorak found himself wondering which Legion they were from. The Raven Guard, perhaps – the pursuit had been stealthy enough. Or maybe some mingled bastard amalgam of the broken Legions, such as infested the dregs of the universe like a stubborn infection. They refused to die quietly, those ones, even though their hopes were long gone. That might have been admirable, or it might have merely been irritating. Given his own situation, Khorak no longer knew which.

The console before him chimed a warning, and the Stormbird's tracking system pulled the gunship into a swirling dive.

'They've locked on,' observed Hesch, coldly.

'Not quickly enough,' said Khorak, gauging the distances and seeing that Narag had been right – he had delivered them to sanctuary.

Las-beams lanced down, sizzling through the thickening void, none finding its mark. The planet's outer layers started to curdle ahead of them, thickening like churned slurry and making the forward viewers race with static. Agarvian was a small world, little more than a planetoid, swathed in gaseous curtains that swayed and trembled, but still it fought their approach.

The Stormbird shook as Khorak piloted it down, its nose soon aflame, its turbofans kicking in again and sucking the gas-rich air in hungrily. More las-beams twisted and spat, following them down, nearly taking the tail off with a direct hit.

But the voidship couldn’t follow them down, and soon the *Skarvor* had levelled into a surging parallel run across Agarvian’s land-mass below – a seamy swampland of olive-green and grey, boiling with gas. They raced across it, weaving through heavy columns of condensation.

‘Just like home,’ observed Turgalla, wryly.

‘If we’re lucky,’ said Khorak, looking for somewhere to land.

That should have been an end to it, at least for many hours.

Agarvian’s atmosphere was a soup of methane and sulphur, laden with floating poisons that clogged, choked and spewed. The terrain was boggy, spore-pocked, a mass of floating weed-clumps atop steaming pools.

Skarvor put down deep inside the northern swamp-zone, the gunship’s landing gear sinking deep into yielding turf. As the ramps came down the air swept inside, foul and rotting even through helm-filters. The sun was low in the sky, setting fast, and across the darkening miasma above faint trails of fire could be seen – the debris of the *Ghogolla*, streaking into nothingness far above them.

Khorak was first out, clanking down from the portals and across the mire. His boots squelched in deep with every step, sucking as the heels pulled free. Hesch followed him, sword already gunning. Ahead of them, the land rose gradually in folds of dense, glistening vegetation, screened by a filmy haze as the world’s edge arced away.

‘Now what?’ Hesch asked.

Khorak had little enough of an answer to give him. ‘We move.’

Hesch stayed where he was. Behind him, Turgalla lumbered out into the open, drawing deep draughts of filth-heavy air through his corroded vox-grille.

‘What of the gunship?’ Hesch asked again, insistent.

‘We cannot hide it,’ said Khorak, looking up at the eastern horizon, where a line of blurred peaks marched under the lowering sky.

‘Nor can we abandon it.’

Khorak was about to reply, when he felt the loose earth tremble. That was no natural tremor. ‘Urgain,’ he voxed. ‘Leave the cockpit. Now.’

The rest of the squad felt it next, ramping up fast, swelling out of the clouds and making them shiver. Seconds later, the billows of white vapour split apart, torn into strips by the thunder of turbos on maximum whine. Three Thunderhawks in charcoal-black livery boomed into visual range, travelling low and fast.

Urgain didn’t hear or didn’t listen. *Skarvor* lifted off again, churning the swampwater into torrents as it turned on its axis to face the threat. Its linked heavy bolters opened up first, hurling shells into the oncoming formation. The lead Thunderhawk took hits across its muzzle, and dived hard amid a shower of deflected sparks.

That did nothing to deter the remaining two, which closed in fast. Even as *Skarvor* gained full loft, their own weapons opened up, spearing fire from adapted turbo-laser mounts. From their vantage they were able to strike true, and a ragged hole was punched clean through *Skarvor*’s starboard wing, sending it reeling.

Turgalla dropped to one knee, angled his missile launcher and fired. A rad-missile streaked up into the sky and impacted hard under the racing undercarriage of the closest Thunderhawk. A green-tinged explosion ignited, rattling along the gunship’s chassis and tearing up its ablative plate. Secondary explosions kicked off, all fizzing with burgeoning radioactivity, and the gunship pulled clear of the *Skarvor*, engines smoking.

It wasn’t enough, though. The two remaining attackers swung round for another pass, raking the larger Stormbird across its back and smashing the armourglass viewports. Urgain attempted to force the issue, using his craft’s greater bulk to ram the closest Thunderhawk out of the sky, but they were too fast, too agile. A lattice of las-fire spun and burned between them, tight and concentrated. Hesch and Lyphas opened up with bolters, but their peppering fire did little but chip paint from the gunships’ hulls.

A direct hit struck the Stormbird on the maw of its starboard intake, and a boom of detonation rang out.

‘Move,’ ordered Khorak, seeing where this was going. He grabbed Turgalla by the shoulder and hauled him away, then reached for Lyphas.

Urgain was still fighting. Secondary blasts ripped the casing from his gunship’s flank, but he somehow spun it round to gain a solution on the lead Thunderhawk. He opened up with all he had left – a vicious fusillade that blew his enemy’s cockpit into pieces and knocked it muzzle-over-chassis in a crazed, whirling tumble.

‘Move!’ Khorak ordered again, shoving Lyphas ahead. Hesch was still firing, roaring out his pointless anger into the skies, emptying magazines that should have been preserved. Khorak grabbed him last, wrenching him around, pushing him to make for the cover that yet might save them.

He resisted for just a moment, furious, ready to stand and fight, ludicrously, in the open. He would never have done that before, not when the Legion had been whole and the command structure was as rigid as iron bars, but now all was corroded and once clear minds had been turned to fury.

Skarvor took a final hit, smashing through its fore plating and rupturing the main fuel lines. Blue-edged flames swelled out, searing down the outer hull and blowing out the turbofans. With a scream of ripping metal, it swung away, burning like a brand.

By then Khorak was marching, driving the others, heading into the thick foliage ahead. He focused as he had been trained to – on survival – barely hearing the crash of *Skarvor*'s final descent. He lashed out with his scythe, clearing a path through metal-dark creepers, and then plunged into the mass of them, shoving and barging through.

The secondary explosions kept on coming, one after the other, a sickening tally of destruction. It was their last void-worthy ship, and it had been with them since before Isstvan. There had been victories since then, many, but the avenue of fate had closed down around them, a vice that had been tightening since the decisions made on that distant day. They were alone now, planet-bound, just as it had been on Barbarus before the coming of the Emperor.

That soul-damned *god*.

The cause of it all. The architect of ruin.

'One gunship left,' hissed Hesch, hard on his heels, his helm-lenses coldly glowing in the gathering murk. The implication was clear: stay and fight, bring it down, salvage what remained.

Khorak kept going. He remembered Narag's words, which had become a mantra to him during planetfall.

On firm ground.

It had been too long since he had fought with his boots planted squarely on a world. Better to die that way than within a machine, out of contact with your enemy, bloodless and remote.

'More are coming,' he said, swinging the scythe to clear the way ahead. They pushed on, deeper and darker, and fronds of twisted bark closed in above their helms. 'We stay alive, we stay in the hunt. Then we turn.' He had to give Hesch something. 'We choose our battleground, then we draw their blood.'

Hesch grunted. Lyphas and Turgalla crowded close, their pale battleplate semi-luminescent in the cobwebbed gloaming. Above them, the juddering

growl of Thunderhawk engines still prowled, but they were now deep in cover and the haze would blunt the augurs.

All around him, Khorak felt destiny narrowing further. The end was coming. He could almost sense the sclerotic gaze of his gene-father – red-rimmed, scrutinising, disappointed.

He dismissed the image. He kept going, just as he always had, even while nameless: one foot after the other, the heel of his manreaper sinking deep into the foul earth.

They evaded the gunships for the entire night. They heard them overhead every hour or so, three or four by the engine-echoes, sweeping the forested zone. One came very close, forcing them to remain motionless, armour powered down, barely breathing, but it passed on into the dark again, its searchlights moving steadily.

They heard rolling booms during the journey from far off, the telltale signs of troop landings. They had long since lost sight of the sky under the tangled mat of vegetation, but Khorak knew that the pursuing vessel was still up there, a new star in Agarvian's heavens, cycling in low orbit and running scan-series to find them.

The going was tough, and he revelled in it. Wading through the bogs made his genhanced muscles ache, and he relished the pain. The air wheezed through his helm's filters, and that gave him pleasure. These creations of distant Terra – armour, machinery – were weak in the face of true poison. Only his Barbaran self remained inviolate, pushing back against the filth, converting it, draining the toxicity from it. This is what they had done since the beginning, and none could do it better. The Raven Guard could dance in the shadows, the Fists could build like gods, but they could not suffer *this* – the slow grind of a world that hated all mortal purity.

Hesch remained close to him, like the nagging memory of a lie. He had taken a hit sometime during the firefight, and limped badly. Even he, though, could see the strategy here: withdraw to a place where none but the sons of Mortarion could fight unimpeded. For the time being that had stifled the scepticism in his questions, and now he was like the rest of them, head lowered, shoulders rolling, striding knee-deep in oily slime as the muck rolled from his armour. Lyphas and Turgalla brought up the rear, dogged and silent.

Four hours later, dawn broke. A grimy blush of white against the horizon, barely detectable under the thick layers of vegetation, unravelling a world of

drabness and steaming fronds. The land began to rise, at first slowly, then ever more steeply, until they were tramping through winding, boggy defiles choked with spines and arm-length weeds.

Another two hours, and Khorak at last ordered a halt. Towers of glistening rock stood on either side of them, streaked with hanging green creepers. They had reached the neck of a tight-turned gorge, a narrow cleft between tracts of nigh-impassable jungle, screened from above by a rearing cliff and on either side by the rocky towers. Only the way they had come was open, and once they turned their guns would overlook the twisting route below.

‘We stand here,’ Khorak announced, planting his scythe.

The others immediately saw the potential. Turgalla took up position on the left flank, facing down into the bowl of swamp below. Lyphas hunkered down a little further away, half buried in loops of slime. Hesch and Khorak took their places at the narrowest point of the neck, their backs against the rock.

Then they waited, falling perfectly silent, perfectly still. Their armour’s power units cycled down to minimum draw. They rested their weapon barrels on the moist hussocks before them, then made no further move. Condensation ran down their pauldrons, hot and sparkling. Their vox-filters strained softly, in, out, the breathing of the endlessly patient. The world hissed and boiled around them, unquiet in its contagion.

Khorak waited. He drew the metallic air in deeply, feeling its hot scratch against the inside of his lungs. He had not felt that since leaving the home world, and it brought a pang of remembrance.

‘Now let them come,’ he breathed, settling for the wait.

It took the hunters four days to find them. During that time the skies wheeled four times, the world’s weak light slicking over the jungle cover. Khorak’s squad did not so much as lift a trigger finger all the while. Their eyes never left their weapons’ sights; their helms never dropped out of vigilance.

The first detected movement was clumsy, crashing through the foliage a hundred metres deeper down. Khorak watched the hunters come – black-armoured Legion warriors, half-baffled by the smog and poison, their arms heavy with grabbing tendrils. Their movements gave away trace fatigue. They must have been slogging through the mires since the Thunderhawks had dropped them on that first day, and it showed.

‘Wait,’ he voxed softly, letting more of them come into the open.

His own squad was near invisible by then, covered in the drifting filth of the world, dug-down and semi-buried. His enemy allowed themselves to become exposed, and he studied them. They wore no marker, just black battleplate with all livery blotted. Some marched differently from the others, as if their training or physique were dulled. The formation was loose, their tactics standard. Soon there were twelve of them, climbing ever closer, still advancing in ignorance.

Khorak allowed himself a parched smile.

‘Now,’ he ordered.

Turgalla let fly, sending a rad-missile into the foremost cluster of legionaries. Even before it had hit, Lyphas and Hesch had laid down a supporting wave of bolter fire, blasting through the trunks of hunched trees and sending the creepers snapping like whips. The deluge smashed the foliage apart, driving a corridor of destruction down from the gorge vantage, briefly opening up the defile’s floor to the grey skies.

The black-armoured warriors scattered, some caught in the fusillade and downed before they could return fire, others scrambling for cover. Khorak noted the kill-counter clicking over on his helm-display – eight, nine, ten – and felt a hot flush of vindication. He joined in the slaughter, firing his bolt pistol to add to the carnage, watching as a sprinting legionary’s helm exploded in a puff of crimson.

It was glorious, a loosed riot of slaying to avenge the damage that the hunters had already wrought. More of the enemy, drawn by the clap and ring of mass-reactives detonating, surged up from the scabrous mire, making heavy work of the ascent and succumbing to the fate of their brothers. Another brace of them fell, choking in the noxious air as their helm-cables were severed and their faceplates shattered.

So they paid. They paid heavily. But they were yet sons of some primarch, immune to fear and tempered by a lifetime of war. The attackers gauged the cover, gauged the numbers, began to fire back to pin Khorak’s squad down. Flamers opened up, clearing swathes of the jungle and burning back the shroud of foliage that hid their prey. Frag grenades spun out of the firestorm, splintering overhead and raining down incendiary murder. However many warriors were dropped, more emerged, first in twos, then sixes, then nines and tens, forging a bloody path up the defile, marching across the corpses of their downed comrades to get into firing positions.

Turgalla was the first to die, his location obliterated by a combined plasma and lascannon strike that scorched the boggy terrain down to naked stone. Then Lyphas was exposed, taken out by pinpoint bolter fire as he tried to withdraw higher up the defile's neck. Hesch and Khorak halted the attack for a few moments longer, using their elevation to sow havoc among the advancing legionaries, but then the foremost enemy warriors broke ahead and into blade range.

Hesch swung out his chainsword, launching himself at the first attacker. The two of them traded blows before Hesch was thrown into the air by ranged fire angling up from below, his breastplate torn open before his opponent's eyes. Striding over, Khorak whipped his crackling scythe blade across, severing the black-plated legionary at the waist and slicing clean through his body. The warrior, cloven in two, collapsed in a fizzing mess of armour-electrics and boiling blood.

Then Khorak, alone now, turned to face the advancing formation, his scythe swimming in disruptor energies, poised to sweep through plate and flesh again. He moved out against the approaching dozens, expecting to feel the first stabs of bolt-impacts across his Terminator armour, anticipating that cleansing pain.

And yet all he faced were shuddering echoes of old discharges.

Twenty metres shy, his pursuers fell back, their weapons trained on him, none opening fire. They slowly formed up in a loose semicircle below him, thin grey vapours curdling around their nightshade armour.

'What now, brothers?' Khorak called out in accented Low Gothic, just as he had done in the days when he had had a voice of his own, when the Legions had fought alongside one another rather than as foes. 'None of you has the stomach to face my blade?'

At that, one of the black-plated warriors moved to the forefront. Like the others, he carried no insignia, but his power armour was heavily modified. Cables snaked around it, bunching thickly where the nodes to the carapace protruded. Glimmers of bare metal gave away the complex outlines of augmetics everywhere – his greaves, cannons, torso.

It looked as if almost all of the matter below his neckline was cybernetic.

Khorak watched him advance until they were barely ten metres apart. The newcomer seemed to be studying him. Khorak held his scythe ready, judging just how far he could punish such presumption.

‘Impossible,’ the legionary said, almost to himself. His voice was a thick cluster of machine-vox timbres, barely human, as deep as a Dreadnought’s rumble. ‘What are you?’

Still Khorak waited. ‘Declare yourself, *blackshield*,’ he said dryly. ‘I would have your name before I kill you.’

The warrior ignored his demand. ‘You wear the armour and you carry the scythe. Has your master given you leave to have a mind of your own, then?’

Khorak listened carefully. The warrior spoke with a strange inflection, but there was something else. The dour snag of Barbaran rhythms, perhaps? This one evidently knew *what* Khorak was, and why it was unthinkable that he should be on Agarvian alone.

‘I always had a mind,’ he replied, ‘but not always a tongue. I took it back, and it has served me well. I ask again, and will not do so a third time – give me your name.’

The warrior reached up and, awkwardly, grabbed his gorget seal and twisted the helm free. The hiss of escaping atmosphere was tinged with green, and boiled away like steam. When it cleared, the face revealed was a mess of scabs and scars, knitted together with metal pins that threaded through hollow cheeks.

He could breathe. He could process the sickened air and still stand steady. So surely he was Death Guard under all that ebon plate, one of the old Legion yet?

‘I am named Crysos Morturg,’ the warrior announced, without pride. Free of the vox-grille’s distortion his accent was neither of Terra nor Barbarus. ‘I once led Destroyers to war under the Fourteenth Legion’s banner. Perhaps you saw me do so on Isstvan Three. Or perhaps you turned your face away on that day, unable to bear the shame.’

So that was it. These hunters were not led by one of the loyal Legions at all, but the disloyal dregs of a disloyal muster, the unworthy and the backward-looking, all of whom should have been long-since culled.

‘You were there,’ said Khorak, a little wonderingly. He had seen the orbital barrages, the waves of landings, and found it hard to countenance the idea that anyone could have lived through that, not even the most doggedly stubborn. ‘How did you survive?’

‘Do not be foolish. No one survived.’

Khorak hesitated, then snorted a dry laugh. ‘Yet here you are, hunting us down for revenge. It eases your pain, this, does it?’

But Morturg made no move. ‘I have slain a hundred of my former brothers already,’ he growled. ‘Every time I felt their blood on my gauntlets, my strength grew. And yet you are different. Why are you here, Deathshroud? How *can* you be here?’

As he listened, a faint, terrible hope kindled in Khorak’s mind. They were battle-brothers of a kind still, the two of them, sundered only by time and temperament. Perhaps that hope was unworthy, a last strand of weakness, but it would not quite die within him.

‘What I was, I no longer am,’ Khorak said. ‘I watched the killing plains of Isstvan, and I never turned my face away, for all who perished there deserved to die, at least as I thought then. And so I remained under the shadow of our master, as his guardian elect, and I followed him into the void, and we began to burn the Imperium from within.’

He paused, thinking back to his second treachery. That had been the harder of the two.

‘But then came Molech. You know of Molech? Maybe even you will have heard of it. The things I saw there… The dead raised and the living slain. My own brotherhood, sacrificed in a ritual of blasphemy to raise an abomination. And on that day I saw that all our master had ever taught us, all the screeds against the witch and the magicks of Old Night, were as nothing. And if his vows had come to naught, what use were mine?’ He raised one gauntlet to his chest in salute, just as he had done from the earliest days of his fealty. ‘So I took my name back. I found my voice once more. Now I have no master, and all swords are turned against me.’

Morturg looked sceptical. ‘You still wear the colours.’

‘Mortarion changed, I did not. I am still of Barbarus.’

Slowly, as if comprehending a subtle truth, Morturg nodded. ‘And you would kill our father, were you to see him again?’

‘In a heartbeat.’

‘And that is your intention, to find a way?’

‘It is all I live for.’

There was no use for lies now, all knew that. Khorak spoke not to preserve his life, but to state the truth, and this Crysos Morturg could see it. Even so, the hope nagged at him, a fragile skein of possibility, barely more than gossamer-thin.

We want the same thing.

Still Morturg did not move. His warriors kept their bolters trained tight, tracking for the merest hint of treachery. The blackshield's brow knitted in concentration, a snarl of ruined flesh over steel. He was considering where all this might lead.

Then a sharp clank of ceramite broke the silence. A metre away, Hesch half rose from the mire, his gun-arm dripping, his helm snaking with electric slivers. He crawled forward, the mouth of his gun smoking, deranged by pain and only seeing enemies. He fired a single time before the chorus of bolter-fire ended him truly, his last shot aimed true, a strike at Morturg's helm.

Khorak whirled around, trying to interpose his scythe blade between the racing shell and its target, but that was beyond even his skill. Hesch's shot punched deep into Morturg's forehead, where it burrowed into the flesh and splintered the bone apart.

Except that it didn't. That was what it *ought* to have done.

The bolt crackled into nothing, forced back from the warrior's skin like a bubble under water, thrown aside, the casing sent flying. Morturg staggered, wincing, and the stink of ozone flowed from his armour. A coil of smoke twisted up across the battered black ceramite, pungent like temple incense.

Khorak knew it instinctively, smelling it, *tasting* it, remembering the awful betrayal on Molech and all that it had brought. 'Witchery!' he hissed.

He whirled, scanning, looking for an external source.

But there was no external source.

Morturg regained his footing, his exposed flesh crawling with pulsing light. Under the weak sun, it seemed as though his outline flickered, momentarily caught between worlds.

'Make no judgement,' he warned, snapping back to solidity with a single step towards Khorak. 'I have no choice in this.'

Khorak withdrew, clutching his scythe defensively. '*Sorcerer,*' he hissed.

'Mortarion is gone,' urged Morturg, keeping his weapon lowered. 'The old sanctions are gone. Where did they get us?'

But Khorak was no longer listening. He stared at his battle-brother's scarred face, watching tumours of unnatural light swell beneath it.

How did you survive?

No one survived.

'You were slain that day,' Khorak said – an accusation. 'All were slain.'

Morturg held his gaze, urgent. 'And I endure still.'

‘Better to die,’ spat Khorak, rekindling his scythe’s blade, ‘than embrace that.’

‘It was only *he* who taught us such things.’

Khorak laughed, tensing for the first strike. ‘And when he faltered, I forswore him. I retain this, though all else is cast aside – *belief*. If it is enough to defy the one who made me, why do you think I would suffer the unclean touch in you?’

‘Brother, do not do this.’

But it was too late. His eyes alive with zeal, Khorak raised the scythe and hurled himself towards the psyker before him. It looked for a moment as if Morturg were trying to hold his troops back, to ward off their protective assault, but in the frenzy of movement such gestures were useless. There were over twenty of his warriors present, and they had never let their guard lapse.

Khorak felt the bolter strikes slice through him, shattering his ancient armour into spiralling dagger-edges, burrowing deep into old flesh that had seen the dawn on a hundred worlds. He missed his footing upon the marshy earth, but the bolts kept coming, tearing into him. Morturg cried out, futilely, his armour-edges still licked with the flames of sorcery.

Khorak’s scythe slipped from his fingers just a hand’s width short of the blackshield’s breastplate. He fell to the ground, the filmy waters slapping across his broken armour, mingling with the blood that now pumped heavily from wounds that could never heal.

He choked. He spat clots of black bile, and writhed with the tsunami of pain. He rolled, snake-like in spite of his heavy armour, only to see Morturg towering over him. His ruined face was etched with remorse – a sentinel to watch over the passage into infinity.

‘It should... never have been...’ Khorak gasped, his last breath coming in bloody gouts. ‘You are naught now but... a ghost.’

‘As are you, brother,’ murmured Morturg, bowing his head. ‘As are we all.’

When all was done, when all that could be retrieved – progenoids, restorable weapons, fuel cells from the downed gunships – had been hauled up on lifters, Crysos Morturg’s warband gathered again in high orbit. The strike cruiser *Malice* keyed up its engines, ready for the long haul to the warp stages. Deep within the armouries, his troops – some Death Guard still loyal

to the Throne, some from the Shattered Legions, others with no clear allegiance at all – repaired their armour and honed their blades.

Morturg himself, in foul humour since the events on Agarvian, remained locked in his tactical chamber, alone save for the hololith that danced before him on the command column. The display showed a set of too-many mechanical limbs emerging from spectral robes – an adept of the Mechanicum, far away, maintaining contact via the signal relay boosters.

'*I had expected to find you in better spirits*,' came the corpse-thin voice of Calleb Decima, the one who had taken the psychically sustained Morturg from the site of his bodily death and given him the shell of iron he now wore. What existed now was a fused entity, a melded amalgam of unholy tech and biomancy, anathema both to their former masters of Barbarus and Mars. In the years since, Morturg and Decima had worked together in the void, hunting down isolated elements of the XIV Legion wherever they could be found.

'He was a traitor himself, to all sides,' said Morturg, moodily. 'He would have cut the Death Lord's throat before me, given the chance. What purpose was there in killing such hatred, such conviction? Better to let him live and sow some greater poison, or turn him to our own cause.'

Decima's mechadendrites scampered over the feed, making the image shiver. '*You are overcomplicating the matter. His death can only aid the Throne*.'

'Really?' Morturg adjusted position, wincing as his augmetics bit deep into what remained of his flesh. 'Now even the old loyalties are gone? Loyalist, traitor – what was he? Both, and neither. We are fracturing out here. He was more blackshield than I, though he never erased his colours.'

If such a thing were possible, Decima looked amused. '*You have been analysing this for some time, have you not? Tell me what you purpose in it.*'

Morturg flexed an augmetic hand, one that bound the last scraps of flesh to adamantium with the forbidden cantrips of sorcery. He was all things now: man, machine, witch. An unholy broth fermented in the cauldron of heresy.

'I thought that bringing pain to my old brothers would be enough,' Morturg said. 'I thought that killing them would give some purpose to this shadow-life we made for ourselves. So did he. Look where that got him.' He let his hand fall, the micro-pistons of his fingers sliding closed. 'I weary of it. I need more.'

‘*Then you know what must be done*.’

Morturg nodded. ‘I do.’

Survival. Endurance. Finding a way to outlast the racing fires.

‘I will set the course, then.’

‘*It will not be easy*.’

‘Nothing ever is.’

‘*And what will you tell your crew?*’

‘The truth,’ Morturg replied. ‘I have been fighting for the Throne for long enough. It is time I met its master.’

CHILDREN OF SICARUS

Anthony Reynolds

Beneath the malignant, writhing heavens of Sicarus, blood was spilled. The desolate plains were strewn with the dead and the dying. Some were human. Most were not.

Many were twisted amalgams of man and beast; others were beings of immaterial flesh and darkness. One was a hulking, red-armoured warrior of the XVII Legion – a holy son of Lorgar. He dropped to his knees, an immense, rune-etched axe embedded deep in his chest.

Before him loomed a bullish creature that stood half again as tall as a Space Marine, an immense brute with a scarred, sulphur-yellow hide. Three cold eyes blinked on either side of its wide head. The beast yanked its axe from the legionary's body, and brought it round in a lethal arc.

The Word Bearer fell, his head struck from his shoulders.

Kor Phaeron – First Captain of the Legion, the Black Cardinal and Master of the Faith – saw him fall. Warp-light flashed within him, revealing his skull in sharp relief through emaciated, grey flesh.

'The Primordial Annihilator take you all!' he spat, thrusting out his hand, and coiling, dark energy crackled from his splayed fingertips. It struck two hunched abhumans clutching primitive autoguns, hurling their bodies backwards.

The effort took its toll. Kor Phaeron sagged, blood bubbling from his lips. He would have fallen had not another Word Bearer stepped in to catch him.

'Master!'

'Acolyte... Marduk...'

A third mutant charged in, swinging a heavy, spike-tipped cudgel. Marduk lifted his bolt pistol, but another warrior stepped between them, killing the creature with a single, devastating blow.

Nemkhar.

The warrior was part of the second generation of Gal Vorbak, legionaries whose souls were fused with the malignant entities of the immaterium – a horrifying fusion of Space Marine and daemon. With Nemkhar, it was impossible to tell where rigid armour ended and flesh began. The ceramite bled where blades and bullets had struck. Each of his arms ended in great cleaving spines, and a crown of horns protruded from his helm.

There was a sudden flash of un-light, and a daemonic beast manifested, flopping onto the ground from a tear in reality itself. Blue-fleshed and

gangly-limbed, it wore a scowl upon its malformed face, and etheric energy crackled around its multi-jointed hands.

It detonated in a riot of colour as Marduk shot it between its eyes, only to see it replaced by four smaller, burning imps that wove into the air, trailing fire. ‘We are killing them in droves, master, but we cannot afford any further losses. We must end this skirmish quickly.’

Kor Phaeron was all but spent. His rage was becoming impotent and bitter. ‘These are... the lost and the damned...’ he managed. ‘They are nothing... to us...’

He saw the massive horned beast kill another of his retinue, one of the mortal servants from the *Infidus Imperator*.

‘That one... That one must die! Kill it, Nemkhar!’

‘By your will, lord,’ the Gal Vorbak warrior replied, and he thundered through the melee, smashing the enemy from his path, making for the great beast. It saw his approach, and turned to meet him, hefting its axe.

But the beast swung too wide, and Nemkhar sprang onto its broad back, talons digging into flesh. It dropped its weapon and grabbed him, but Nemkhar had a hold of his prey now. Its end was inevitable. He wrapped his bladed arms around the base of its skull and twisted. Its bull-like neck was as thick as a Contemptor’s torso, but Nemkhar’s strength was far beyond that of a mortal being.

The beast fell, its vertebrae broken, and the enemy horde’s will to fight was gone. What had been a battle became a slaughter.

Moments later, it was over.

More than thirty of the foe were dead, yet three of the Word Bearers’ mortal slaves had also fallen, and the one noble warrior of the Legion. Kor Phaeron looked upon the survivors: Nemkhar, Marduk, Burias, Koshar, Dol Ashem.

So few.

The haggard-looking human attendants and serfs huddled together, the gaunt hierophant Gemiah Daemos and the wordsinger Aklion among them. He’d not bothered to learn the others’ names. They meant little to him.

Half a dozen Word Bearers, and twice that number of mortals, were all that remained. Their number was being whittled down by the *daemon* world that should have been their sanctuary.

Kor Phaeron scowled and shrugged Marduk away. The Master of the Faith should, by rights, be long dead. Too old for the extensive surgery and gene-

manipulation required to make him a full-blooded Space Marine, Kor Phaeron had nonetheless undergone extensive and painful augmentation to allow him to serve as Lorgar's First Captain.

His heavily modified suit of Terminator armour – the Terminus Consolaris – had helped extend his lifespan far beyond that of a normal man, before his mastery of the warp had rendered it unnecessary.

Even so, he should be dead.

His primary heart was gone, torn from his chest by Roboute Guilliman, the thrice-accursed primarch of the Ultramarines. Kor Phaeron clung to life now only through sheer bloody-minded determination and the stubborn, unshakeable strength of his faith. The power of the Primordial Annihilator infused him, worming through his veins and leaking from the corners of his eyes like black vapour.

After Calth, he had fled into the warp aboard his flagship. Escaping the vengeance of the XIII Legion and the eventual destruction of the *Infidus Imperator*, the gods had apparently delivered him here only to die a lingering, drawn-out death at the hands of Sicarus' daemonic inhabitants.

Wheezing, he limped to Nemkhar's side. The Gal Vorbak warrior rose to his feet, bone-blades withdrawing into his flesh.

The Master of the Faith's gaze was drawn to the crumpled form of the monster at Nemkhar's feet. Its neck was broken, its head twisted almost completely around, but it was not yet dead. Its gold-flecked eyes blinked in alarm, and pale blood leaked from slack lips.

Nemkhar gestured to the thing. 'Its life is yours, my lord.'

'A powerful sacrifice,' he replied, lowering himself to one knee with some difficulty. He drew his unholy ritual blade and held it to the beast's throat. 'May the Octed receive this offering and hear my prayers. Grant me the strength I require.'

But before he could act, Kor Phaeron felt a surge of etheric power in the air, and the beast began to convulse. A face grew within the shuddering meat of its broad chest, pushing out with the dull crack of shifting bones.

The face was aristocratic, with high cheeks and thin lips. A third eye opened upon its forehead, and it turned to look up at Kor Phaeron.

'I am Larazzar, the Voice of Change and Ruler of the Nine Clans. Already you have killed five of my champions, False Speaker – now my favoured and eldest son, Orox'i'nor, lies dying at your feet. This is a great insult.'

Kor Phaeron scoffed. ‘We are the true Bearers of the Word. We have nothing to fear from you.’

‘I will see you eat *the words you bear, truly. Great shall be your suffering.’*

The face sank back into broken flesh, and the beast finally lay still.

Skinless daemons, raw and bloody, descended on leathery wings to feed on the carcasses of the fallen. Marduk glanced around.

‘What now, my lord?’

In the distance, jagged red lightning split apart the sky, and Kor Phaeron narrowed his eyes.

‘We move,’ he hissed.

It was impossible to gauge the passage of time. No sun rose or fell on Sicarus – the world appeared to exist in a perpetual magenta glow, the sky burning in a hellish maelstrom. They might have been there for a matter of days. It might have been years. Every moment blurred together into an endless, waking nightmare. One moment, they spied a great tower of twisted rock in the distance, then it was already behind them.

What was certain, however, was that they were being hunted.

Marduk scanned the horizon. ‘I see them, master. They are closing fast.’

‘How many?’

‘I can’t be certain. Too many for us to face.’

Kor Phaeron trudged on. ‘Have faith, Marduk. The Octed will show us the way forward.’

Even as he spoke, a cliff face loomed out of the magenta haze ahead. With no frame of reference, neither its scale nor its distance could be discerned. He glanced back. Their pursuers hurtled across the hellish landscape at tremendous speed. None touched the ground, yet they kicked up great lines of dust and debris in their wake.

Some rode in gilded chariots that sliced through the air, pulled by sleek daemonic entities limned with blue fire. Others stood upon the back of blade-fringed discs, or were borne by nothing more substantial than roiling blue witch-fire.

Nemkhar sneered. ‘Let me face them, my lord.’

‘It would be your death, brother,’ Marduk warned him.

‘I am a soldier of faith. To die in service of the gods and the Legion would be a great honour.’

‘No,’ said Kor Phaeron, shaking his head. ‘You are the last of my chosen Gal Vorbak. Your place is by my side.’

Nemkhar bowed his head in deference to the Master of the Faith. ‘By your will, my lord.’

A haze the colour of haemorrhaging blood rolled across them, momentarily obscuring the looming cliffs. When it cleared, a single robed figure leaned upon a crooked staff less than twenty paces away.

The Word Bearers raised their weapons, though this apparition made no threatening move towards them.

‘Greetings, Bearers of the Word. I have been waiting for you.’

‘We don’t have time for this...’ Kor Phaeron muttered. He nodded to Marduk, and the acolyte squeezed the trigger of his bolt pistol.

The figure wavered like the image on a pict-viewer disrupted by static as the shot passed through him. He disappeared, then re-materialised several metres away, completely unharmed.

He pushed back his deep hood with one gnarled hand to reveal an old, weather-beaten face framed by long, braided white hair. His forehead and cheeks bore ritual scars, and Kor Phaeron felt an itch in the back of his skull as he looked upon the symbols.

There was something familiar in their shape...

‘Who are you?’ Kor Phaeron demanded.

‘I am the eighty-seventh reincarnation of the prophet Jepeth. Your appearance was foretold.’

‘Foretold by whom?’

Jepeth seemed to ignore the question. ‘Come. The Kairic Adept Larazzar seeks your end, but not all the clans have yet been subjugated to her will.’

‘What do you gain by helping us?’

‘A future. We are all children of Sicarus, together.’

Marduk stepped forwards, impetuously. ‘Why should we trust you?’

‘Because I have foreseen your future,’ the prophet replied. ‘I have seen you reunited with your golden lord.’

There were gasps from the Word Bearers and their mortal followers. The dark-light within Kor Phaeron surged, like a flame before the bellows. ‘What know you of our primarch?’

Once again, Jepeth did not answer directly. ‘We must be swift. Will you follow?’

Hunger burned in Kor Phaeron’s empty chest. He nodded.

Jepeth smiled. ‘Good.’

The old prophet struck the ground with his staff, and they were suddenly standing at the base of the vast, towering cliffs, reaching many hundreds of metres into the sky. There appeared to be no way through, however. The rock before them formed a solid wall.

‘Not all is at it may first appear on Sicarus,’ Jepeth said, picking his way through the group. ‘Such has ever been its way...’

The prophet tapped the cliff face with his staff, and it rippled like the surface of a wind-blown lake. A narrow crack was revealed where none had existed before.

‘Come. My people await you.’

They delved deep into the darkening chasm, following behind the old prophet as he led them along its twisting route. Kor Phaeron looked back. The entrance was still there, in the distance, and at the same time it was not. The image of the crack was superimposed over solid rock, like two overlapping realities.

The stone to either side of them was worked with inscriptions and pictograms showing warring nations, fire raining from the sky, and men with the heads of beasts.

‘Master...’ breathed Marduk. ‘Look.’

One wall was covered with images of warriors in heavy armour, standing taller than men. While they were crude and worn by the passage of time, the distinct shapes of the pauldrons and helmets were instantly recognisable. One of the giants bore a book from which flames sprang, and while much of the mural’s colour had long since faded, it was still possible to see that, once, they had been painted a deep blood-red.

Jepeth did not turn. ‘As I said, we have been waiting for you.’

‘For how long, old one?’ Kor Phaeron asked.

The prophet shrugged. ‘My first incarnation painted these prophecies.’

‘My brothers and I did not always wear red…’

The old man shrugged again.

‘In my waking dreams,’ he began, as though explaining something he did not even fully understand for himself, ‘I always saw you as you are now. You walk a preordained path to glory.’

Kor Phaeron scowled. The thought that every choice he had made over the centuries was predetermined was not one that sat well with his ego or his faith. Still, while prophecy was not something to be followed blindly, nor

something that could be guaranteed, *true* prophecy was also not to be underestimated.

The trick was in knowing which prophecies to believe.

He loomed over Jepeth. He could smell the cancer in the old man's bones, sense his flesh rotting slowly from the inside out. Aging was a vile, hateful thing. Kor Phaeron's own imperfect body was a constant reminder of that.

The Black Cardinal took a wheezing breath, pushing his resentment deep within himself. He'd been doing it for so long, it came as easily as breathing.

'Lead on,' he growled.

It was an eerie sight that greeted the Word Bearers when they finally emerged from the rock. A series of chasms intersected in a steep gorge open to the sky. The sheer cliffs were carved with stairs and primitive dwellings.

The inhabitants, the Children of Sicarus, crowded the gorge, standing in windows and doorways. Thousands of them watched in silence as the prophet Jepeth led the Word Bearers towards the middle of the settlement. The only sound was the echoing wind and the vaguely unsettling whisper of bone-chimes.

Most of the people were robed and daubed in umber, their faces and arms tattooed with cult symbols and patterns that Kor Phaeron knew well. The similarity to those of the True Faith of Colchis was undeniable.

Marduk looked to the sky. A burning chariot pulled by daemonic entities circled overhead, accompanied by a host of lesser daemons that left burning blue fire in their wake.

'How has this valley remained hidden?' he wondered aloud.

In a flash of crimson lightning, Kor Phaeron saw an illusion of a cavern roof far overhead, at once there and not. He felt the touch of the warp upon this place. 'Wards and magicks. Only a powerful seer could penetrate them.'

'Could you?'

Kor Phaeron glared at his acolyte.

'No,' he snapped. 'Nor could any within our Legion, save Lorgar Aurelian himself.'

Jepeth took them towards a rock spire in the centre of the gorge. It rose for a hundred metres, with carved stone stairs climbing to its peak.

'The Fane of the Blessed,' he announced reverentially. 'This is where the prophecy is housed. Come.'

The crowds began to whisper as the Word Bearers approached the spire. They reached out for Kor Phaeron, straining to touch his massive, armoured

form. Nemkhar growled, but the Master of the Faith waved him off.

‘Hold, Nemkhar. They will not harm me. Look at them. They revere us as gods...’

‘Not gods,’ Jepeth corrected him. ‘*Saviours*.’

The whispers grew into scattered cries. They openly praised Kor Phaeron, some falling to their knees and weeping with happiness.

‘Why do they thank me, prophet?’ he murmured.

‘It is in recognition of what you *will* do, my lord. The Children of Sicarus offer thanks for the salvation you bring.’

The six Word Bearers and Kor Phaeron’s human servants climbed the stone steps, leaving the crowds behind. The enemy chariot streaked once more across the sky, scouring the land below.

Jepeth pointed upwards. ‘The Kairic Adept Larazzar searches for you still, but she cannot breach our illusions. She knows of the destiny I have predicted, and seeks to prevent it from coming to pass.’

‘What does she care for your dreams and divinations?’

‘Your arrival signals her end, Bearer of the Word. She knows this, just as she knows the Children of Sicarus will play a part in her demise. Long has she sought the destruction of my people, in the hope of cutting the strands of fate that will lead to her fall.’

Kor Phaeron considered these words for a long moment. ‘Show me this prophecy.’

They continued until they came to a terraced platform. A smaller carved stairway rose up inside the fane. Jepeth stood aside, gesturing Kor Phaeron forwards.

He hesitated for only a moment. ‘Nemkhar, with me. The rest of you remain here.’

‘As you will it,’ the Gal Vorbak warrior replied.

Marduk stepped to his master’s side. ‘My lord, I will join you as well.’

‘No, Marduk. Stay here. Be watchful.’

Kor Phaeron climbed painfully after Jepeth, with Nemkhar at his back. The entrance to the fane was not meant for their armoured bulk, and both were forced to stoop.

Inside, all was darkness.

‘*Khor-ignis,*’ Jepeth whispered. At the prophet’s word, sconces burst into flame.

Kor Phaeron took in the details of his surroundings – it was a claustrophobic, circular room, lined with columns chiselled in the likeness of leering daemons. Every centimetre of the walls was engraved with writings and pictograms.

Jepeth gestured for them to proceed deeper into the shrine. Scowling, Kor Phaeron strode forwards, ducking his head beneath an archway of skulls and entering the inner sanctum.

His attention was instantly drawn to a shallow iron plate standing atop a pedestal. A knife lay upon the plate, and the Black Cardinal felt a surge of etheric power within him as he looked upon it.

He gasped. ‘It cannot be...’

Jepeth laughed softly. ‘You know this weapon.’

Kor Phaeron lifted the dagger. It was a ritual knife, with a curved, tapering blade and a coiling, serpentine hilt. ‘This is the ritual athame I gave to my adopted son, back on Colchis. It belongs to the lord of the Seventeenth Legion – the Aurelian, Lorgar! How did it come to be here?’

‘It was left in preparation of this day.’

‘Left by whom?’

Jepeth gazed vacantly back at him.

Nemkhar was staring at the images to the rear of the shrine. ‘My lord…’ he called out.

Still holding the athame, Kor Phaeron joined him, squinting.

Pictograms recounting everything that he and his warriors had done since arriving on Sicarus covered the wall. The images were simple things, yet the likeness of Kor Phaeron and each member of his retinue was unmistakeable. There was Nemkhar, his body swollen with the daemon sharing his form, his arms ending in claws and bone-spines; and Marduk, his armour swathed in the robes of an acolyte; the novitiate Burias, and the others.

Kor Phaeron’s eyes flashed as he stared upon his own representation, with its age-lined face and sickly demeanour, and the heavy book chained at his waist.

He saw their battles with daemonic entities and warbands of Chaos. He saw the death of Orox’i’nor, and the enemy pursuing them across the surface of the daemon world. He saw Jepeth, the image of the prophet leaning on his staff, and their approach to the carved city where they now stood, all protected by a grand illusion from the Kairic Adept, Larazzar, whose

minions had pursued them. She wore blue armour, and coiling flames held her aloft.

Kor Phaeron skipped ahead, moving to the final sequences. They showed Word Bearers leading the Children of Sicarus through a portal of fire, to be met on the other side by a golden-skinned giant bearing a spiked mace.

‘When will we rejoin the primarch?’ Kor Phaeron demanded.

Jepeth kept his distance. ‘For the final battle.’

Nemkhar clapped a gauntlet to his chest. ‘We will stand alongside him on Terra!’ he cried.

‘It has been foretold,’ said the prophet, simply.

But Kor Phaeron could not fully comprehend what he was seeing. ‘Tell me how this will come to be. Tell me!’

‘You already know. You hold the key to that future.’

Kor Phaeron looked back, searching for an answer. He came to one particular image, and his eyes narrowed.

It showed him plunging the ritual blade into his own throat, and blood fountaining out. In that release, the gateway to Lorgar was opened.

‘What madness is this...?’ he murmured.

He realised that he appeared nowhere else. Indeed, it seemed in the later images that it was his acolyte Marduk who was leading the Word Bearers through the portal. It was Marduk who had the holy book chained to his waist.

Jepeth spoke with certainty. ‘Through your blood shall your kin be reunited with your golden lord. So it has been ordained.’

Kor Phaeron stared at the images. Nemkhar looked at him, his eyes blazing with faith renewed.

‘To die in service to the Primordial Truth and the Legion, my lord... It is a great honour...’

‘And your sacrifice brings hope to many,’ Jepeth agreed. ‘You are a glorious martyr, my lord.’

The Master of the Faith turned, slowly. Warp-light flickered in his hateful eyes.

‘My fate is my own. Nemkhar, kill him.’

The prophet was genuinely shocked. He took a step back. ‘What? You cannot defy the gods’ will!’

Even Nemkhar faltered. ‘My lord?’

Kor Phaeron took a deep breath, infusing his words with the power of darkest sorcery.

‘Kill him!’

Nemkhar’s daemonic taint rose in an instant, his physical form altering even as he leapt at Jepeth. The old man was thrown to the dusty floor, screaming in fear and pain, before the Word Bearer silenced him with a ragged slash of his claws.

The chamber was suddenly silent, except for Nemkhar’s bestial panting and the crackle of burning sconces. Kor Phaeron glared down at the bloody ruin that now lay between them.

‘Where does your loyalty lie, brother?’

‘In my faith.’

‘And in me?’

‘Of course. My lord.’

‘Good. Burn everything here, Gal Vorbak. And speak of this to no one.’

Kor Phaeron emerged back into the light, with Lorgar’s ritual blade concealed beneath his robe. His followers were looking up in alarm.

‘My lord!’ cried Marduk, racing to his side. ‘The wards!’

The illusions concealing the valley from above were fading, leaving it exposed. Already, daemons were circling overhead, filling the air with their screams. The acolyte took Kor Phaeron’s arm, to steady him.

‘Where is the prophet?’

‘Dead. His prophecies were naught but lies.’

As he spoke, the Black Cardinal glanced towards Nemkhar, who had appeared from within the burning shrine. The Gal Vorbak warrior said nothing.

Sorcerous fire began to fall like burning rain. It streaked down amongst the Children of Sicarus. All was panic below. The crowd scattered, trampling those unfortunate enough to fall in their haste to escape.

‘My lord. She is here.’

A shining figure was descending in the fire. The Kairic Adept, Larazzar, stood upon a spiked disc, surrounded by flames of an ever-changing hue.

Marduk was ready with his pistol. ‘Do we shoot?’ he whispered.

‘No, my young acolyte. Not yet.’

Daemons and other twisted minions in flying chariots descended with Larazzar, regarding the Word Bearers with disdain. Kor Phaeron stepped forwards to meet her nonetheless, his hands clenching to fists.

‘But be ready,’ he added quietly.

Larazzar turned in his direction. She was tall and powerful, encased in fluted, electric-blue armour of elegant design. She had three arms, and bore a tall spear, its tip burning silently with an azure flame. Her helm was featureless and blank, yet Kor Phaeron felt her gaze upon him.

His skin tingled as she drew closer. Once, she might have been human. Now she was something else entirely.

She stepped off her floating disc. Where she walked, life sprouted, grass and tiny flowers manifesting wherever her boots made contact with the stone.

With one of her three hands, she pulled her helmet free. Her face was as he remembered it, the high cheekbones tinged blue and dark teardrop tattoos under her eyes. In place of hair, she had feathers, glossy black with an iridescent sheen. The third eye, ice-blue and flecked with gold, rolled open upon her forehead.

‘This is an unexpected changing of the fates, False Speaker,’ she said, her voice rich and even. ‘My master is pleased. Countless futures are being re-woven even now.’

Kor Phaeron gritted his teeth. ‘I will forge my own future.’

The warlord laughed.

‘You are a selfish, singular creature. Your actions have unravelled countless destinies. And yet... I am intrigued.’ She looked around, as if seeing her surroundings for the first time. ‘I have long sought this place. You have my thanks for revealing it to me.’

The daemons and mortal servants of the Kairic Adept continued to circle, waiting upon the word of their mistress. Kor Phaeron held his ground.

‘What is it you hope to achieve?’ he asked.

‘Immortality, of course. Subjugating this world is the final step towards that goal. The prophet Jepeth blocked my ascendency. Now, this obstacle is removed.’

Kor Phaeron could feel the gifts of the Primordial Annihilator upon her. Its touch bled from the warlord in palpabable waves. She was close to daemonhood – perhaps closer than she realised.

She regarded him curiously. ‘There is something about you. Let me offer you a proposal.’

‘A pact?’

‘Yes. One that will benefit us both. You will help me take this world, and slay all who oppose me.’

‘And in return?’

Larazzar’s triple-gaze hardened. ‘Colchis is burning. Your beloved world of empty cathedrals and meaningless prayer.’

The Word Bearers bristled. ‘Colchis has been destroyed?’ Marduk asked, his eyes wide.

‘You lie!’ Kor Phaeron hissed at the warlord. ‘She lies, brothers!’

‘No,’ Larazzar replied, unmoved. ‘It is already aflame. Or it will be. Time is not the steady stream that mortal minds perceive. Either way, you will never return there. I offer you this promise – help me ascend, and I will let you remain upon *this* world as my subjects. You will have my leave to remain here even after I have departed.’

Kor Phaeron looked away, considering her offer. His gaze dropped to the cowering Children of Sicarus, peering up from below. Larazzar did not notice them, or did not care.

‘The Golden One will be pleased that you have prepared the way. Sicarus will never burn like Colchis. You will have provided a bare sanctuary for him and the Legion when he needs it.’ She leaned closer. ‘And he *will* need it.’

‘And the pathetic wretches that call this place home?’

‘I will claim their flesh for the Changer of the Ways. Their prophecies will never be spoken again. Is that enough for you? Will we swear our pact?’

‘We will,’ Kor Phaeron sighed. He stepped forwards, offering his hand to seal the alliance in the ancient manner.

Larazzar stared down at the open gauntlet. ‘Then let it be so.’

Her power was staggering. It surged from her like water from a burst dam. For a moment the Black Cardinal saw Larazzar as she might be – a figure of towering might, with great, blue-sheened wings and coiling horns. The mortal members of Kor Phaeron’s retinue dropped to their knees, blood running from their eyes, ears and noses.

Upon the Children of Sicarus, the effect was far more devastating.

Men, women and children twitched and screamed as their bodies reformed with sudden and uncontrollable change. Bones broke as limbs bent and were remade, then remade again. Flesh and tendons tore as anatomy twisted and contorted, and spines rolled back upon themselves as new limbs and blindly groping protuberances. Gibbering mouths, cackling and whooping, split

torsos. Taloned, multi-jointed hands tore bodies apart from within, birthing repulsive, pink-skinned daemons that giggled and leered.

Larazzar stood with her arms held wide. In the throes of her power, she did not sense Kor Phaeron looming behind her, the sacred dagger of Lorgar Aurelian clasped in his hand.

He reached out and opened her throat with a single, deep cut.

‘Did the gods not show you *this* future, witch?’ he spat, hauling Larazzar off her feet. ‘Perhaps you are not as adept as you thought...’

Kor Phaeron held the gasping warlord aloft as her lifeblood gushed from severed arteries. The etheric energy surging from her was redirected into the Black Cardinal, and he shuddered as it flowed up his arms.

The servants of the Kairic Adept, mortal and daemon alike, screamed. Some tried to close on Kor Phaeron, talons and blades reaching, but he hurled them back with crackling arcs of black lightning.

Dark-light blazed within him. Steam rose from his flesh, and his eyes flared with witch-fire.

Finally, he dropped the wasted corpse of Larazzar to the ground, and his exultant expression gave way to bitterness once more. As the last of her power bled from him, he became the same crippled, spiteful creature that he had always been.

‘The gods test me...’ he rumbled, ***‘but I will not be broken. This world is mine.’***

Kor Phaeron stood atop a rocky precipice, gazing upon the infinite vista of construction below.

Already the great cathedrals and spires of worship were climbing towards the burning heavens. Soaring scaffolds and plunging foundations divided the land, and endless columns of slaves, bound by chains and lashed by black-clad overseers, toiled in the depths. Monstrous beasts dragged great loads of stone and iron, while bound daemonhosts lifted arches and keystones into place with their potent magicks.

‘It is a grand vision, my master,’ said Marduk as he approached.

The Black Cardinal eyed him warily, even though he knew Jepeth’s false prophecies were no more. ‘It is indeed. Our lord Lorgar will be most pleased... Once we re-establish contact with the Legion.’

‘But if the Warmaster is victorious – or has already won – will any of it be needed? If he succeeds and throws down the false rule of the Emperor, the war will be over.’

Kor Phaeron looked again to the daemon world spread out before him. ‘Our part in Horus’ plan is done, for now, but the war will *never* be over. Such is the way of things. This world will be our refuge, our sanctuary. In the decades, the centuries and millennia to come, Sicarus will be the place where we can lick our wounds and gather our strength. It will be our staging ground, and the centre of our faith.’

He sneered inwardly at Marduk. The acolyte was hanging on his every word.

‘From here we will wage a war against the universe,’ he continued, grim certainty filling him for the first time that he could recall, ‘and enforce the will of the Primordial Annihilator. For we are the Bearers of the Word, and an eternity of blessed conflict awaits us.’

Kor Phaeron of the Word Bearers

EXOCYTOSIS

James Swallow

Dawn came to Zaramund in slow ranges of colour, yellowed streaks the shade of bruised flesh rising up across the vault of the sky and bringing with them gradual changes that crept across the dense, forested landscape.

Calas Typhon stood upon the ridge above the encampment and watched it come, his helmet dangling at the end of his arm and the low, cold breeze plucking at the matted hair of his unkempt beard. He imagined himself a fixed point in space and time, around which the cycle of Zaramund moved endlessly, his presence changeless and constant.

Dawn and dusk, night and day, these things were trivial and distant concepts to a legionary, trimmed from Typhon's existence along with hundreds of other small, human things that his kind lost when they were transformed. He had no need to sleep or to fuel his body in human ways, and it had been so long since he had known need of these things that they had become alien in concept. In his deep past, the man who was now First Captain of the Death Guard Legion had progressed through a state-change that irrevocably rewrote his physical nature.

A dawning of my better self, he considered, with a brief, bleak smile.

The moment of amusement guttered out like a snuffed candle as his usual dour mien replaced it. Typhon's brow furrowed as he tried to grasp the ephemeral edges of the thought that had been tormenting him ever since they had arrived on Zaramund – even before that, if he were honest with himself. He could almost form the idea, but every time he reached for it, it retreated. It was like running his fingers through the flow of a river, seeking one single ebb of current. The truth was infuriatingly beyond his reach, a phantom retreating into the warp, and even after the hours Typhon had spent up here in isolation and self-reflection, it still escaped him.

He let the moment of reverie crumble and his gaze tracked a heavy shuttle as it lifted off from one of the temporary landing pads on the south side of the encampment. The brick-shaped craft rose into the lightening sky on crackling thruster bells, carrying aboard it new components and equipment for the repairs to the *Terminus Est* and the other vessels in his flotilla. Typhon watched the shuttle shrink to a dot, and high above he picked out the constellation of bright morning stars that were his battle-barge and its sister ships, drifting up there in a low, geostationary orbit.

The warship had suffered greatly, and there had been a moment when Typhon feared that Zaramund might become her grave marker. But the fates had a way of confounding a warrior's expectations. Instead of battle, the *Terminus Est* had found a safe harbour and an unusual welcome from a quarter that Typhon had never expected: Luther and his renegade Dark Angels, planting their standard next to that of the Warmaster Horus Lupercal…

As much as this turn of events was welcome to the Death Guard, Typhon could not help but be suspicious of it. But then, was that not the nature of the sons of Barbarus? To distrust all that could not be seen and touched and broken?

Typhon shook off the thought with a flick of his head, removing a gauntlet and raising a hand to run it over his close-cropped temple. Luther's generosity was, like it or not, sorely needed by the First Captain and his Grave Wardens. Expedience overruled distrust.

For the moment.

The thought faded as Typhon's fingers found a new lesion on his scalp, hidden in the greasy layers of his hair. He tried not to dwell upon it, but his hand slipped to the back of his neck where the mottling of his skin had begun several weeks earlier. There was a cluster of livid boils there, a triad of them that were strangely cold to the touch. Other marks elsewhere on his body, similar in kind but better hidden in the crevices of his musculature, were slowly growing more numerous.

And yet, they caused him no pain. If anything, Typhon felt physically stronger than he ever had, as if he were improving with each passing day. *Am I unwell?* The question echoed in his mind, and it seemed ridiculous. *Inconceivable! I am a Death Guard, the obdurate and unrelenting. There is no known toxin or sickness that can lay us low.*

He wanted to laugh off the thought, but it nagged at him. Typhon became aware of a few tiny, black flies circling his head, little things barely larger than motes of dust, and he swatted lazily at them as he spied a figure approaching up the incline of the ridge.

The other Death Guard removed his helmet as he approached and halted a few metres away, giving a shallow bow. Hadrabulus Vioss was a captain of Typhon's Grave Wardens, and his master's right hand. 'My lord,' he began, 'you have been vox-silent for some time. Your communications circuit registers as deactivated.'

Typhon glanced down at his helm, then away. ‘I required some time to think, nothing more. What is it that you want, kinsman?’

‘Not I, First Captain.’ The Grave Warden’s shorn scalp bobbed. ‘The Dark Angel, Luther. He wishes to speak with you.’

‘Reasons?’

Vioss’ lips thinned. ‘Are you asking me to guess?’

Typhon made a gesture for him to continue, and his second-in-command took a breath.

‘I think he wants us to stand with him. To speak well of him, to the Warmaster.’

‘Luther is gauging the price he will ask in return for aiding us.’

Vioss nodded. ‘Aye.’

Typhon pushed away the thoughts that had been clouding his mind and took a step forward. The synthetic musculature beneath the heavy ceramite plates of his Terminator armour hissed gently, and he turned his helmet in his hands as he reactivated its systems.

‘He is a warrior of Caliban, after all,’ he added, after a long moment. ‘They all have a hunter’s eye for the calculations of warfare.’

‘We *will* owe him a debt,’ noted Vioss.

‘Indeed,’ Typhon allowed, and started down the ridge towards the camp. ‘But there are other scales that need to be balanced before his.’

‘There is much to be done,’ muttered Luther, his hooded gaze searching the hololithic chart table before him. Dull light from the display underlit his face and the low ceiling of the command chamber. Above the glassy surface of the table, renderings of nearby worlds turned along their orbital plots, and clusters of dark-green arrowheads – indicators suggesting starship deployments – swam in the void zones between them. ‘If he’s out there… we need to be ready to meet him with force when the time comes.’

‘Corswain,’ said the Lord Cypher, considering the name. ‘If what the Death Guard told us was true, then allowing Typhon’s warriors to rest here may draw him to us.’

Luther shot him a warning look. ‘Is that censure in your words, brother?’ Before Cypher could reply, he went on. ‘Use your gifts. If the Lion’s lapdog has our scent, we will build a snare for him when he comes.’

‘I have sensed nothing,’ admitted the psyker. He paused, then lowered his voice. ‘Perhaps you will enlighten me, lord. Perhaps you will tell me what it is we gain from aiding Mortarion’s men.’

The answer, shaded with derision, slipped from the mouth of another Dark Angel who stood close by, his gaze lost in the hololithic display. ‘Such allies…’ The captain realised that he had spoken out of turn and bowed slightly. ‘Forgive me, Lord Luther. I did not mean to–’

Luther cut him off with a blade-like motion of his hand. ‘Speak your mind, Vastobal.’

Captain Vastobal took a breath, and then launched in. ‘The path you have chosen for us. It will be harder to walk it alone.’

‘But?’ Luther’s piercing gaze held him in place.

‘I question if these Death Guard are not what we *need*… but merely what we *have*.’

‘You think we would be better to abandon this world and seek out the Sons of Horus ourselves, is that it?’ Luther frowned. ‘Annexing Zaramund was just the first step. Typhon’s arrival was merely a fortunate confluence of events.’

Vastobal hesitated, and Cypher spoke for him, anticipating the captain’s words. ‘He does not trust them. He believes the Death Guard have nothing with which to repay our generosity.’

‘Gratitude is not in their lexicon,’ added Vastobal.

Luther was about to add something, but then an icon flickered into life on the chart table and a mech-voice announced an incoming vox-signal, a message sent from the repair camp that the Dark Angels had granted to Typhon’s men several weeks ago.

‘Speak of the beast…’ muttered Cypher.

‘Answer,’ Luther told the table’s machine-spirit, and the lines and shapes of the display reoriented themselves to form a three-dimensional avatar of the Death Guard First Captain, sketching him in from the waist upwards, as if he were a spectre rising out of the horizontal screen.

‘*Well met, Lord Luther,*’ rasped Typhon, his face hidden behind the tarnished brass of his visor. Each of them silently noted the Death Guard’s mild insult by not facing the Dark Angels Grand Master bare-headed. ‘*You wished to converse with me?*’

The question that dallied in all their minds was clearest on Vastobal’s face. *What have they got to hide?*

‘First Captain Typhon,’ said Luther, maintaining a neutral tone. ‘How go the repairs to your ships? My technologians inform me that the work proceeds apace.’

Typhon's mask bobbed. '*We will be whole again very soon.*'

'We have several experienced Techmarines in our ranks,' offered Cypher. 'If it would expedite the situation, we can deploy a squad to you–'

'*No need.*' Typhon cut him off. '*These are our craft. We know them best.*'

Luther leaned on the edge of the chart table, eye to eye with the hololith. 'Cousin,' he began. 'You have been on Zaramund for over a month now. In all that time, you have turned down my every invitation for respite with us, my offers of serfs and brethren to aid you. You take only materiel and never venture beyond the walls of the encampment.' He showed a wan smile. 'I am beginning to think I have offended you in some manner.'

'*Not so,*' replied Typhon. '*Your generosity is greatly appreciated, my lord. But the Death Guard do not easily accept charity. It is a flaw in our character.*' He paused, addressing them all. '*And I would not wish for any incidence of disagreement to emerge between our two Legions.*'

'I do not follow,' said Cypher.

Typhon's masked face turned towards Zahariel. '*After being hounded for so long by your brother Corswain, some of my warriors bear enmity towards the sons of Caliban. It would be unfortunate if a…* misunderstanding *were to occur.*'

The implication beneath the words was clear.

'Corswain is no brother of ours,' said Vastobal firmly. 'Not any more.'

'*Of course,*' allowed Typhon. '*I will merely say, it is better that the repair work is done by my men alone. I ask you to respect that request.*'

'As you wish,' said Luther. 'But I will expect to share a drink with you when all is done.'

'*There will be repayment, yes. Until then, Lord Luther. And once again, my gratitude to you.*' Typhon inclined his head and the hololith winked out.

'He's afraid his men will pick a fight with ours?' Cypher fairly sneered the words.

'A poor excuse,' said Vastobal. 'My lord, he is not being truthful with us. The Death Guard do not deserve the goodwill you are showing them.'

'Oh?' Luther gave him a cool glance. 'Then by all means, captain, correct me.'

Vastobal paused, realising once again that he had overstepped the mark. It was a trait he had never been able to expunge, and one that all too often led him into trouble. He pressed on, committed. 'Allow me to surveil Typhon and his men. So that we may be certain of what they are doing inside the

walls of that camp.' He glanced at the Lord Cypher. 'We have all heard the stories of what those behind the Warmaster's banner are doing on other worlds…' He drifted off, as if he were unwilling to say more.

Luther and Zahariel exchanged a loaded look.

'I would expect my centurions to act in the best interests of the Legion at all times,' Luther said, 'with care and discretion.'

'No less,' Vastobal agreed, accepting the unspoken order. He saluted Luther with a mailed fist to his breastplate, and stalked away across the command chamber.

Hours passed. Typhon wandered through the camp, directionless and lost in his thoughts. He saw the work around him but did not really register it. His mind kept straying to distant questions.

The ship-helots from the XIV Legion crews brought down from the fleet toiled tirelessly at their assignments, assembling and preparing replacement parts here on the surface before the shuttles took them up to the battleships. They worked in a sullen, careful rhythm, and those of them that did not have lobotomaic implants – the ones who still possessed something of a persona – passed the time with old plainsong remembered from the days of farming the harsh chem-fields of Barbarus. Their low voices drew distant memories from Typhon, back out of the poison mists of his past and into the present, but he dismissed them. It irritated him for reasons he could not articulate, like rough cloth rubbing over chafed skin.

In his right hand he gripped the long haft of *Manreaper*, the power scythe that was the First Captain's signature weapon, absently kneading the grip and letting its weight drag on his arm. The scythe acted like an anchor, pulling Typhon into the moment, keeping him grounded when his thoughts threatened to carry him away.

It was hard for him to maintain his focus. More and more often, Typhon was finding himself drifting, a dark miasma buzzing coldly at the edges of his thoughts whenever his mind was supposed to be at rest. The subtle magnetic pull of it seemed strongest when he was aboard the *Terminus Est*, and then even stronger when the ship sailed the warp, as if out there in the churn of the empyrean a clarion was calling that sang only to him.

A voice echoing from that *other* place.

Typhon had come down to Zaramund partly to watch over the helots but also to put some distance between himself and the void. It had not worked.

Day by day he felt less like the warrior he had been and more like a traveller inside his own skin.

He thought about the sunrise he had witnessed, and the creeping motion of light and shadow that followed. A shift of similar magnitude was moving through him, he could sense it. A state-change that would bloom in fullness if only he would let go and allow it.

And what then? Typhon had led his breakaway splinter fleet out from under his primarch's shadow because he believed that he had a destiny of his own to fulfil. *I always did, even when we were youths. Even at the beginning, before Mortarion's father came for him.* But now that path was coming into sharper focus, and Typhon was uncertain of where it would lead him.

He took a deep breath and found it tasted odd – not from the air, but from the spittle in his mouth. He swallowed, halting his mind before it could wander again to thoughts of lesions blossoming on reddened skin and cold scales over oily flesh.

The First Captain's attention snagged on a pair of legionaries who crossed his sight at a jog, each of them carrying their bolters at the ready as they scrambled up an incline to sight over the walls of the camp and into the treeline beyond. Their boots thudded against the Mortalis-pattern structures of the prefabricated walls, kicking up puffs of displaced rust.

Typhon went after them as another Death Guard – a veteran sergeant with a bulbous augmetic eye – followed the warriors to their post. 'You,' he commanded. 'What is wrong here?' No alarm had been sounded, but the actions of his men spoke to a warning.

The sergeant halted, covering a moment of surprise at seeing the First Captain before him. He gave a brisk salute and jerked his head towards the walls. 'Lord Typhon. A minor incident, at the perimeter.' He paused, gathering himself. 'Civilians. We sighted a group of them on the scry-sensors approaching down the valley.' The sergeant pointed into the distance. 'The vox-tower contacted them, warned them off. They came anyway.'

Typhon sensed the dark glitter at the edge of his vision once again, as if it were light flickering off the wings of resting insects. He walked with the sergeant, following him up the ramp. 'What do they want here?'

'Unclear.' The sergeant pointed again as they reached the level of the ramparts. 'Look there, lord.'

Typhon planted *Manreaper*'s shaft on the platform at his feet and peered out at the gathering of people visible through the edges of the treeline. They were settling in by the side of the dirt road that led back towards civilisation.

Some of them caught sight of him and they froze like prey animals caught in the savage gaze of a predator. On the wind, Typhon picked out their hushed murmurs and saw others coming together, whispering intently. One of them spoke into a hand-held communicator.

At his side, the sergeant's manner shifted and he let his bolter drop slightly.

'Lord… a message from the vox-tower. The civilians have responded to our warning. They say they won't leave.' He gave his commander an odd look. 'Not until they are allowed to speak to… to someone called *Typhus*.'

The trees rendered Vastobal an emerald ghost.

As dense as the forests on Caliban, the tall and slender trunks gathered in on one another in thick stands broken only by game trails and the occasional clearing. The gathering light of the day did not penetrate far through the canopy, and Vastobal was able to slip from one pool of shadow to another, barely disturbing the undergrowth despite the bulk of his power amour and the enveloping folds of his deep-green war-cloak.

Alone and vox-silent, it had been easy for him to melt into the woods and make them his ally in concealment. Once he passed the line of perimeter sensors the Death Guard had seeded in the forest, he felt a warning pulse through his veins. They were acting as if Zaramund were enemy territory, a place annexed by the XIV Legion from an unwilling populace, rather than the gift of sanctuary it truly was.

Behind the breather grille of his helmet, Vastobal's lip curled. With each step he took, his misgivings grew firmer.

He had spotted the civilian caravan a few hours in. Hidden from their sight, he watched them pick their way down the track leading to the Death Guard encampment. He listened to them talking and singing. He studied their manner. They were *happy*, and he could not fathom why. This strange group of Zaramundi natives, a mixture of all kinds from all strata of the planet's feudal society, acted like they were on a celebratory outing to some great festival. They were buoyant, but strangely earnest with it. He searched his thoughts for the right word to encapsulate the mood he saw.

A pilgrimage?

Partly out of curiosity and partly because they served as a good distraction to any watchers, Vastobal shadowed the civilian band for the rest of their journey, paralleling their path until it ultimately deposited them at a distance from the gates of the repair camp.

He found a hide inside the hollowed-out core of a fallen tree trunk and used the rangefinders in his helmet's optics to scan the iron walls, looking for points of weakness. Vastobal planned to wait until nightfall and enter the camp in stealth, to penetrate as deeply as he could and observe the activities of the Death Guard unaware. If they thought no eyes were upon them, he reasoned, their true character would soon reveal itself.

But the Dark Angel had barely settled himself when the armoured gates of the camp hissed open on pneumatic rods, parting wide enough to allow a figure in Terminator wargear to stride through. The livery was the same as that which Vastobal had seen in the hololith, and the massive scythe in the warrior's hand erased any doubt as to the identity of the Death Guard who wore it.

First Captain Typhon. Vastobal tensed, his hand falling to the hilt of his sheathed longsword. *Could he know that I am here?*

The Dark Angel had heard the stories of Typhon's battle prowess, and murkier suggestions that he was some kind of psyker – although that seemed uncertain, given the XIV Legion primarch Mortarion's antipathy towards mind-witches. He drew on his training to slow his heartbeat and will himself to fade into the forest, lest some fraction of whatever preternatural sense Typhon might possess were to brush over him.

It appeared to be enough. Typhon halted before the civilians, these *pilgrims*, looming over them, his full focus on the mortals who bowed at his feet.

Vastobal tuned his auto-senses to maximum and strained to listen to the words passing between them.

Calas Typhon knew well the faces of common men who looked upon him and his kind. Without fail, the emotion etched upon their countenances was always *fear*. The shade of it might change with the circumstance, but they were always afraid of him, terrified of the paragon of war in plate and steel before them.

Not here, though. Not these men. They looked up at him with something approaching adoration, as if he had come to bring them deliverance. Typhon

gave in to an odd compulsion to remove his battle-helm and look them in the eyes, but the act seemed only to cement their manner.

They whispered among themselves, nodding and smiling.

As if they know me.

Irritation pulled at his mouth. ‘Who are you, and what do you want?’

‘We have come to see you,’ said one of them, a steely old woman with the manner of a lifelong matriarch. She beamed at him. ‘Ah, it was worth the trip, yes?’ She threw that question to the others and they nodded in agreement. ‘Here you are. Just like we were promised.’

‘I do not know you,’ Typhon retorted, annoyed by her manner and by a creeping sense of something amiss that refused to abate. ‘This is a military installation. You cannot be here. Return to your homes.’

‘We have abandoned them,’ she explained. ‘It was time. Your arrival made that clear.’

He shook his head. ‘If you do not depart on your own, you will be removed by force.’ Typhon glared at her. ‘We won’t be gentle.’

She smiled up at him as if he were some wayward son, and gestured at the air around her. ‘We’ve all heard the whisper of the wings.’ The old woman’s choice of words shocked him into silence. ‘The glittering black-silver. Like you. We’ve all been given gifts.’ She rolled up her sleeve, revealing a bird-thin arm and tanned, wrinkled skin like careworn leather. ‘I was supposed to die of a canker. Instead, I blossomed.’

Typhon blinked as a tiny insect buzzed between the two of them. From the corner of his eye, he realised that there were more, dancing in shafts of sunlight falling through the treeline. Black motes, coiling around like wilful smoke.

She showed him the inside of her forearm and the lesions there, all mirrors of the ones on his scalp. Others in the group presented themselves in similar fashion, some unbuttoning their shirts so Typhon might look upon their breast or throat. He saw cold and yellowing marks in tri-part clusters. The same. The very same.

‘It was the Grandfather who brought me back from the canker,’ the old woman was saying. ‘He spoke to us about you, the Great Lord Typhus. Our champion.’

‘My name is *Typhon*,’ insisted the First Captain. ‘Calas Typhon.’

‘Oh, for the moment,’ she said, dismissing the comment. ‘Things grow and change. There is death, and rebirth.’

The old woman placed a hand upon his vambrace, the spidery, stick-thin fingers tracing over the metal, and he looked down. She was drawing shapes there, a pattern of three interlocking circles.

His thoughts raced. Ever since he had been a youth, Typhon had sensed the motion of greater things out beyond the edges of his perception, like the wakes of giant, unseen leviathans passing below the surface of the ocean. Once, he had been marshalled in his use of those abilities, harnessing them in service to his Legion – only to be forbidden all such practices by his primarch.

That those forces had impressed themselves upon his life was not in question, but he had rarely encountered those who had felt that touch themselves. Not even Erebus, with his marks and his words, seemed so close to him as these strangers before him now. The air was filled with a strange, potent scent – sweet and acrid all at once, like flowers blossoming from within corpse-flesh.

‘You see,’ she said, and her rheumy eyes were shiny with tears. ‘Yes, indeed. You do see it, don’t you? We have been waiting here for so long, my lord. Unhallowed and rescued from our maladies over and over, all for this. For now.’ She nodded, and as he looked closer, Typhon saw the broken blood vessels across her neck and face, the remnants of harsh infection. ‘It is time.’

His gaze swept across the others and he saw the same. Hollowed faces of men that should have been long dead, drawn back from their end into a kind of null-decay. It was like a veil briefly dropping from his eyes. He saw these people as they really were: the living who fate decreed dead, held in abeyance by the very malaises that should have ended them.

‘How are you alive?’ he whispered.

‘You know,’ smiled the old woman. ‘By the grace of the Grandfather. And with your passage, herald, we can move on.’ She spread her hands. ‘We may finally impart our gifts and marks to everyone on Zaramund… and beyond.’

Typhon looked down and saw the leathery skin of the woman’s arms rippling as tiny shapes moved beneath the surface of her flesh. Motile black specks began to extrude themselves through her pores and swarm across her hands, forming a shiny, dark mass.

A terrible and potent reaction rose up in Vastobal, a wellspring of repulsion that spilled out of the core of his being.

He could not tear his gaze away from the pilgrims. All of them were spreading their hands in religionist poses and oily, glistening matter was seeping from their mouths and nostrils, weeping from their eyes and ears.

Even at this distance, the stink of the noisome fluid was like a physical blow. Vastobal recoiled, feeling his gut clench and stiffen. The gene-forged of the Dark Angels were capable of ingesting matter without effect that would have killed a normal human instantly, but this bilious reek was so utterly foul that it threatened even the iron constitution of a Space Marine. Blinking away chemical tears, Vastobal activated the atmospheric seals on his power armour and set it to a mode more suitable to an ultra-toxic death world or deep-void vacuum than the placid woodlands of Zaramund. He lurched out of his hiding place, fighting down the wave of nausea that had come over him, and gathered himself. The captain's cloak rippled over his shoulders as he grasped the hilt of his longsword and slid a short length of it out of the scabbard, preparing for a full draw.

The pilgrims turned to him, and he beheld horrors.

Gawping, slack-mouthed corpses that were animated by jerky, marionette motions. Agglomerations of dead flesh that mimicked the shape and form of humans. Repellent things that belonged in a midden or a grave.

The Death Guard Typhon did not seem to care about the sudden transformation at hand amongst the civilians, instead turning with obvious threat towards Vastobal as he made himself visible. Typhon pointed his power weapon in the Dark Angel's direction and called out a command to halt, but Vastobal was only half-aware of it.

His attention was taken by the *things* around him.

All the mad rumours and insane half-truths he had heard about the Warmaster's dalliance with the eldritch and unknown now came snapping into hard focus. The possibility he had always secretly hoped was untrue now revealed itself to him. Vastobal was a son of Caliban, and sons of Caliban knew the truth about monsters lurking in the dark. *The rumours of the unclean are real*, he told himself, *and worse than I could have believed.*

Distantly, Vastobal's duty made itself known to him. Luther had to be warned about what he had allowed to set foot on Zaramund, warned about whatever foul sorcery the Death Guard had brought with them from their alliance with Horus Lupercal.

The creatures had other plans. The men-things reached for him, spilling black ichor across the undergrowth at his feet as clawed fingers scratched at

his armour. Choking in a breath through the lingering stink in the confines of his helmet, Vastobal's hand jerked and the rest of his sword came free.

His unsheathing swing was wide and it took the head from one of the unhallowed pilgrims. Instead of a jet of crimson, a flood of black foulness issued into the air, and Vastobal recoiled once again. The others mobbed him and he reacted with swift, deadly force. Another, then two more of the pilgrims were cut down by his blade.

Everywhere he opened them, blackness exploded outwards, moving like oily smoke.

Belatedly, Vastobal realised that the repellent fluid was a colossally dense mass of tiny insects, flies that the corpses vomited out in great, buzzing swarms.

Reason threatened to slip from him as the full extent of the horror became clear. The Dark Angel's warrior mind slipped into pure combatant mode, some rote-trained element of his thoughts taking over as a base instinct overrode all other concerns.

Destroy this foulness. Wipe them all out. Expunge them.

Vastobal moved quickly, leading with the sword and cutting down everything that crossed his line of sight. In the melee, the need to destroy the pilgrims became all-consuming, as if the Dark Angel were suddenly an antibody compelled to eradicate an infection marring the body of Zaramund.

A dark, sizzling slick of insects and black blood coated his armour as he advanced towards the old woman he had seen begin it all, the one who had been speaking with the Death Guard. She was the heart of it – yes, that was clear now. Bellowing a war cry, Vastobal went at her with his sword falling from on high, intent on opening up her stick-thin frame with one cut from jowl to bowel.

The curved head of a scythe blade came out of nowhere and blocked the falling strike before it could connect.

Typhon decided that the Dark Angel had gone mad.

One moment, the Death Guard was seeing… *something*… and the next his gaze was ripped away from the old woman by a cloaked form crashing out from the treeline, shouting incoherent warnings about corruption and filth.

Typhon was about to interpose himself between the civilians and the other legionary, to demand an explanation as to why one of Luther's men had seen fit to approach their camp's perimeter unseen – but events overtook any such calm response.

The Dark Angel began killing. He did it with such ferocity that Typhon was momentarily taken aback. He had seen such blind fury in the Word Bearers or the World Eaters, but never from the more measured warrior kin of the First Legion.

The civilians actually fought back. They moved with a purpose that common men seldom exhibited before the shock and awe of a legionary in full flow, but it counted for nothing. The Dark Angel put them down with swift, flashing strikes from his weapon, blood splashing where it struck. Typhon was aware of the insects again, as if coming out of nowhere, doubtless attracted by the scent of spilled blood.

The moment stretched and he let a surge of cold anger push him forward. Typhon turned to meet the Dark Angel's blade as he came hurtling towards the old woman, her tear-streaked face a picture of shock as this avatar of death itself thundered across the clearing.

Their weapons clashed with a shriek of powered, crystalline steel, for a brief instant seemingly frozen in time.

'Stay your hand!' Typhon snarled.

'What obscenity have you brought here, Death Guard?' The Dark Angel shouted the words back at him, shaking with rage. 'This profane horror will not stand!'

Locked in their violent embrace, Typhon could see the warrior's name etched in golden scrollwork over his breast, surrounded by laurels that designated the rank of captain.

'Vastobal,' he grunted, hoping that by addressing the Dark Angel directly he would get some sense from him. 'Stand down!'

'Never in the face of such pestilence!' The other warrior broke out of the lock and attacked again in a flurry of slashes and jabs from his longsword.

Typhon planted his feet in a defensive posture, fighting with both hands on *Manreaper*, using the shaft to parry and block every hit that Vastobal tried to land. The Dark Angel's cloak whipped around him as he looked for an opening; he was good, Typhon had to admit, and had Vastobal's discipline been in place instead of his rage, the clash could have followed a different path.

His jaw set. He had no time for this. When Vastobal attacked once more, Typhon spun his power scythe in a flashing arc and used the heavy heel to knock the Dark Angel off balance.

Hit hard, Vastobal went down on one knee and Typhon pointed the scythe's curved blade at his head. 'Enough!' he snapped.

'No, not enough!' Vastobal bellowed. The Dark Angel's sword flew at Typhon in an upward arc that was so fast, it almost caught him unawares.

Typhon shifted in his stance, but not quickly enough to avoid the very tip of the blade screeching as it scored a line up his chest-plate, and cut into his face through the mat of his unkempt beard.

His hand went to the wound. There was blood.

Dark it was, so dark as to be almost *black*. In the few moments before the Space Marine's accelerated metabolism clotted the wound, fat droplets fell from the cut and splashed against the ground underfoot.

And something altered inside Calas Typhon, something dark and deeply buried. Released, it uncoiled and was reborn.

The change was blink-fast, an element of his spirit reforming into another shape. His soul twisted at the sting from the wound – but it wasn't the small nick in his flesh that angered him. It was the flood of emotion, of sudden rage and hatred at the Dark Angel's insolence and idiocy.

How dare Vastobal do this? How dare he?

Does the fool not understand who I am? What arrogance compels him to strike me and those like me?

Typhon let the cold, simmering fury break its banks and he struck back with his scythe, putting all the power of his Terminator armour's superior musculature into the blow. The blade struck the centre of Vastobal's longsword and cleaved it in two – half the length whipped away with the spent kinetic force of the impact, and the other vibrated in the Dark Angel's hand. The First Legion captain was staggered by the break, and in another time and place that might have signalled the end of this ill-fated clash.

It was not to be. Forces larger than Typhon were at his back, a buzzing, droning vibration that ran through the meat and bone of him. They propelled him forwards into a stomping, steady advance. The Death Guard captain felt a crawling, electric sensation coursing through his bloodstream, like insects in his veins. His hearts hammered at the inside of his reinforced ribcage.

The buzzing was in his head, the black-silver glitter ghosting at the edges of his sight.

Typhon recalled all the times he had taken the Ritual of the Cups, a post-battle rite in which Death Guard commanders would share a draught of pure poison with their most valiant warriors. The drinking of the venoms, a

challenge to the gene-forged hyper-metabolism of the Space Marines, was intoxicating in its own way and Typhon savoured the rush of it. The threat of true death made a legionary's adrenaline surge high.

But this was better.

He felt potent and powerful. *Unstoppable*.

Light flashed from the steel as *Manreaper* fell towards Vastobal's chest. The Dark Angel rolled aside and barely escaped the weapon's kiss as the scythe bit into the ground. Typhon slashed downwards again, and once more Vastobal almost paid with his life. From the corner of his shadowed gaze, Typhon thought he saw the earth where the blade had landed liquefying into muddy, toxic slurry.

His fractional moment of distraction allowed Vastobal to stab him. With all of his enhanced might, the Dark Angel came forward and jammed the blunt edge of his broken sword into the tiny gap between the plates of the plackart that protected Typhon's lower torso. Levering it outwards, the broken blade slashed power cables and artificial muscle bundles and finally tore through the wargear's undermesh, the last barrier before the Death Guard's flesh.

Typhon roared and stiffened, standing in place as Vastobal lost his grip on the sword and fell back once again. It was a deadly wound, one that even a warrior of the Legiones Astartes would be hard pressed to shrug off.

But instead of the torrent of pain he expected, Typhon experienced a boiling, churning corpse-cold at the site of the stabbing. He looked down and saw a dark red shimmer creeping along the fraction of the broken longsword's blade that was still visible to him.

At first he thought it to be blood, but Typhon did not bleed that colour.

It was *rust*. In the blink of an eye, corrosion spread over the weapon – across the blade, hilt, pommel and all – and Vastobal's sword turned to gritty powder, the metal exhibiting a thousand years of age in an instant.

Vastobal's face remained hidden behind the black of his battle-helm's visor, but his reaction was clear through the motion of his body, his hands rising in an unconscious gesture of warding.

'What have you brought here, Death Guard?' he whispered.

Typhon opened his mouth to reply, but the only sound that escaped his lips was the echo of the droning buzz inside him.

He gave in to the act he was longing to complete. *Manreaper* glittered once more against the sun, and when its wide and lightning-fast arc was at

an end, Captain Vastobal's helm – his head still contained within – rolled a metre from the Dark Angel's twitching corpse.

The old woman knelt before the Death Guard, and every one of the pilgrims did the same, pressing their scabrous foreheads to the mud amidst the opened bodies of their kindred. Together, they uttered a single word in a breathy rush – '*Typhus*' – and then fell silent.

Typhon trembled with unchained energy, and it took a physical effort to reel himself back in. His hand went to his torso, where the ragged rent in his armour was still gaping. The edges of it were damp with clear mucus, but there was no pain. Only a cold, clammy sensation, the same as he had felt around the clusters of lesions elsewhere on his body.

The change, he realised. *This is no malaise. It is* improving *me.*

The old woman looked up at him, as if she caught the echo of his thoughts. Her smile was all black, rotted teeth and the bloom of new undeath.

'First Captain!'

Typhon spun around as the veteran sergeant he had left on the battlements came striding towards him, a trio of Grave Wardens in close formation behind.

'My lord, are you injured?'

Typhon slowly shook his head. 'Sergeant, what did you see?'

The Death Guard pointed his bolter at the beheaded Dark Angel. 'He came from nowhere! We saw him attack you without provocation and kill the civilians…'

'Is that *all* you saw?' Typhon's gaze bored into him, the air turning metallic as his hidden preternatural senses reached out.

'My lord?' The sergeant seemed confused by the question.

Typhon waved him away. 'Never mind.' His hands flexed around the hilt of his power scythe and he took a step towards Vastobal's body. The buzzing pressure at his back had returned – or had it ever really left? – and he let it gently push at him. Black flies darted around in the sudden stillness, dipping down to gorge themselves on the spill of rich legionary blood soaking into the earth at his feet.

'What are we to do with the body?' said one of the other warriors.

Typhon glanced at the old woman, who gave him a demure, conspiratorial nod. '

'It will be dealt with,' he replied.

Luther's gaze tracked back and forth across the chart table as data scrolled from one side of the glassy surface to the other, the arrival of each new pane of text signalled by a quiet bell chime. It was a march of interminable information, bulletin after bulletin pertaining to the logistics and minutiae of maintaining a fighting force upon a newly conquered planet. While the Grand Master had adjutants to whom he could turn this task, there was a part of him that was always drawn back to peer over their shoulders. Some seed of disquiet that something vital might be missed if he did not personally cast an eye over all aspects of his new fleet and his centurions.

Behind him, the command centre's hatch dilated and Cypher stepped through, a mordant cast to his face. He had been about his own tasks for the past few days, since before Luther had granted Captain Vastobal leave to covertly observe the Death Guard, and he suspected that Cypher had also been using his own subtle methods to spy on Typhon and his Grave Wardens.

'What is it?' Luther demanded, sensing the onset of a new problem in the other warrior's manner.

Cypher offered Luther a data-slate by way of an answer. Displayed upon it was a god's-eye pict-capture from one of the constellation of scrying satellites orbiting above Zaramund. It showed a dozen false-colour blurs caught in motion over the curve of the planet below. Starships, he guessed, captured in the act of breaking orbit at combat velocity.

'The Death Guard are gone,' explained the Lord Cypher. 'All of them. No word to our stations. No *thanks*.' He spat the word bitterly. 'They simply boarded their vessels in the hours of darkness and then broke for the system's Mandeville point at full burn.'

Luther raised an eyebrow. 'And the repair camp?'

'Empty.' The other warrior leaned in. 'We should have listened to Vastobal.'

'And where is the good captain?' Luther glanced around the echoing command chamber, his eyes never finding the centurion he sought. 'Seek him out for me. I would know why he did not report their preparations for departure.'

'He may have tried,' said Cypher darkly.

Luther met his gaze, and an unwelcome chill prickled at the base of his spine. A low chime sounded from the screen-table before him and, by reflex, the Grand Master glanced down at the display.

The newly arrived datum was a minor alert: a civilian medicae in one of the outlying colonial settlements was requesting assistance from an Apothecary of the Legion, to deal with an unidentified infection that had arisen in the community.

Luther dismissed the data pane with a flick of his hand and looked back at Cypher, brooding on what as-yet-unseen effects his generosity towards Typhon's warriors would leave behind.

Typhon did not need to look up at the great portal across the compartment to know that the *Terminus Est* and his fleet had just entered the warp.

He smiled to himself as he walked to the ornate cabinet in the corner of the meeting chamber, the pistons in his heavy armour gasping quietly with each movement. He could feel the empyrean realm out there, the thud and heartbeat pulsing of it washing against the Geller fields of his ship. Typhon imagined it as an endless, protean ocean of blood in which the vessel was now submerged. Alive and restless, calling out to him.

He wondered what would happen if he ordered the protecting energy sheath to be shut off.

What would I allow in? What would emerge out of myself in order to meet it?

The smile grew as he arranged a series of pressure-sealed flasks in a row. Typhon was experiencing something that had always seemed impossible to hold on to. *Clarity*. That was the only word for it. He almost chuckled. It was some cosmic joke, a great irony. All his life, from his tormented youth on Barbarus to his redemption in Mortarion's ranks and beyond, to this day, Calas Typhon had been reaching for understanding. Now he saw that it had been a part of him from the very beginning.

Those who had hated the pallid, hollow-eyed boy that he had been, the ones who shunned him and named him half-breed and witchkin, perhaps they were the ones with the most insight. In their dull way, they had seen a fraction of Typhon's true potential.

What was the word that old hag used? She called me the herald…

He liked the cadence of that title. It had import to it, the weight and moment of greater things at hand.

Herald.

It spoke of one bearing the undeniable truth, one who carried the harshest reality for all to hear.

And Typhon found himself knowing that truth, fully and completely. He was Death Guard, and had always been so. Alive but forever dead. Moving and never halting. Held in abeyance between the pulse of life and the cold embrace of the grave. Others would see this as contradictory, but not he, not now.

They are the same, he told himself. *Until Zaramund, I lacked the perspective to see it.* Now he was beyond the moment, it seemed odd to think of any other state of mind.

It was as if he had always known.

Typhon removed seven baroque steel bowls from a compartment in the cabinet and counted them out. As he did so, his free hand drifted to the place where Vastobal's broken longsword had penetrated his armour. He paused, glancing down. The ceramite there was soft, like new flesh, but the rent in the plate was gone. Healing, like an extension of the body beneath.

A single black fly crawled across the surface of his wargear, but he paid it no mind. There was a brief flicker of concern that died out almost as quickly. *When was the last time I took off my armour?* He dismissed the question. It was unimportant.

From the flasks, he poured measures of poisons and toxins that swirled around the bowls to become powerful, lethal brews. Vapours that would kill on contact coiled in the air, and the First Captain drew them in like they were fine perfume.

Lord Typhus.

He heard the voice behind him and turned. Vioss stood in the hatchway that opened onto the anteroom beyond. 'What did you say?' Typhon asked him.

'Lord Typhon,' Vioss repeated, his helmet cradled in the crook of his arm. 'I have assembled the senior officers as requested. Your Grave Wardens await you.'

He beckoned with one armoured gauntlet. 'Bring them in. I would speak with my kindred.'

Vioss gave a shallow bow, and presently he returned with a cohort of five more legionaries, each one a battle-tested veteran of countless wars throughout the Great Crusade.

Typhon knew them all, knew the colour of their hearts and the secrets of their souls. He wanted to show them the truth that he knew, and in time he would. But for now, for today, he would help them take the first step.

‘I have considered much in our time on Zaramund,’ he began, ‘and I believe we have reached the end of this chapter.’ Typhon bade them take up the stance of the Seven, each warrior falling into rote positions from the old Dusk Raiders battle formation. They left a place for him in the middle of the group, waiting patiently and silently for the First Captain to continue. ‘Brothers, today we end this journey as a splinter fleet of the Fourteenth. I know now we must reunite with our Legion and our primarch.’

He saw some of the Grave Wardens exchange wary glances, but none of them dared speak out at his words.

‘We are stronger in union,’ Typhon went on. ‘Unbreakable.’ He looked away, turning his back on them to make the last preparations for the Cups. ‘There is much we can give to our kinsmen. I know that now. I needed distance from our gene-father to see that. So we will reunite. This will be my order.’

Unseen by the others, Typhon reached up to the mark that Vastobal had given him upon his chin. He reopened the wound and it slowly wept fluid into the matt of his thick beard. The First Captain allowed the cut to leak into the palm of his gauntlet. Black, oily liquid gathered there.

‘We are to return to the main body of the Legion, then?’ Vioss ventured the question. ‘We will stand beneath Lord Mortarion’s standard?’

‘Aye. I wish it.’ Typhon let his gauntlet pass over each metal bowl, allowing a single drop of his dark and tainted blood to fall into the infusion. ‘Join me now, brothers. Take the Cups with me, and seal our intent.’

He stepped aside, and each warrior came forward to take his offering before returning to his assigned place. Vioss was last, and he hesitated before picking up the vessel. Typhon took the last one and saluted him with it.

Something uncertain flickered in the Grave Warden’s eyes, but then it was gone. Vioss walked back to his position, and Typhon stepped into the space that had been left for him.

‘Drink with me,’ he said. ‘Join me.’ Typhon raised the cup to his mouth and drained the contents in one single draught.

At his sides, his men did the same, opening themselves to change and to truth.

THE PAINTED COUNT

Guy Haley

There was the sword, and there was the ship. Those two things alone occupied all of Gendor Skraivok's thoughts.

At that moment, the sword was pre-eminent. Skraivok lay sprawled on the large bed in the centre of the chamber, his back against the headboard. The bed was comfortable, more than most Skraivok had known since his days as a mortal lordling. The headboard was not, being cast alloy depicting a fussy pattern of interlinked ribs, spines and howling skulls. Skraivok had always been fond of comfort. He had never completely accepted the idea of the warrior aesthete. Let others prove their worth with coarse clothes and uncomfortable furniture. A soft bed did not make him any less of a killer.

He let the metal nodules of the bedhead compress the skin over his black carapace. He was too preoccupied to notice. Lately, comfort had ceased to matter.

It was dark in the chamber, Nostraman dark, the lumens modified to burn low. Ersatz flames danced in electro-flambeaux set against the walls, causing the many shadows to shiver and dance.

They were grand chambers, as befitted his rank. Orlon had stupidly suggested he take Curze's as a show of strength. Skraivok had declined. That would be a provocation too far to those opposing him.

Besides, only an insane man would wish to dwell in the primarch's sanctum, and any sane man that took up abode there would not long remain so.

On the far side the room was the sword. It was propped in its scabbard against the backrest of a chair that matched the bedhead, and so he could not see the dull, weirdly non-reflective metal of its black blade… But he could feel it. The weapon tugged at invisible hooks sunk deep into his soul. Not so much a call as a *demand* that he take it into his hand.

It was not a sword. It looked to all intents like a sword, its well-made if scuffed belt of alien-looking skin wrapped around the quillons and the length of the scabbard – the sort of battered but favoured weapon a warrior like him might have owned for a lifetime.

Only it was not. Before Sotha he had not had the weapon. It had not, by any objective standards, even existed.

At least, not as a sword.

Its appearances might fool everyone else, but Gendor Skraivok knew what it was, and it was most assuredly *not* a mundane blade.

He ground the heels of his palms into his eyes. The room reverberated to the muffled sounds of repair. They went on night and day, a constant backdrop of banging, heavy tools and screams that, outside the soundproofing of his quarters, rose to a cacophonous din. Multiple, maddening sources of vibration that managed to drown out the pulse of the ship's reactor.

'I cannot think!' he shouted at the ceiling. The racket pounded on uninterrupted, and Skraivok groaned. 'Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!'

The ship was the other thing. The ship, and the fleet, and the Legion. He should be leading it – not that morose fool Shang. The primarch's equerry was a knotty problem, one that could not be solved with that damnable sword poking into his mind.

His bare feet whispered over the human-skin divan as he swung them off the bed.

He hung his head a moment, teeth clenched. He made a strangled noise and propelled himself upright.

'You will not win,' he said to the sword.

He spoke to it often, but the sword never replied.

Sooner or later he would talk to it in front of the others. That would not be a good thing.

Skraivok blinked stupidly at the mess in the chamber, as if returning home to find it plundered. Food mouldered on fine plates. The stuffing of furniture gathered in drifts in the corners. Ewers of wine lay on their sides, their contents gone all to vinegar. Pieces of his armour were scattered where he had thrown them. A mirror showed a wild-haired, hollow-faced thing. It took a moment for Skraivok to recognise himself. The black streaks he painted over his eyes that gave him his cognomen of the Painted Count were smudged across his face.

He curled his lip at his appearance. That needed fixing too. Everything would be better when he was rid of the sword.

Once that was gone, he would feel more like himself again.

'Right then,' he said. 'Let us get this over with.'

Slowly, he gathered up the pieces of his wargear and struggled into them. Then, forcing himself not to pause, he grabbed the sword about its middle and roughly picked it up.

He opened the door to his chambers. Of course, Phy Orlon was waiting outside, with that sickening, sycophantic expression plastered across his narrow face.

‘Ah! Lord Skraivok, it is good you emerge. Are you well rested?’

It astounded Skraivok how such a vulpine little thing had made it through the selection process. Even bulked by legionary gifts, Orlon still managed to convey the impression of feebleness. Towards the end, Nostramo had been providing only the dregs of the dregs. No wonder Curze had levelled the place.

Weakness was like the scent of blood in the water to the Night Lords. Legionaries like Orlon would always attach themselves to those they deemed powerful, for protection. That explained the ridiculous batwings welded to the top of his helm in emulation of Sevatar, and why he had appointed himself as Skraivok’s adjutant.

‘Do I look well rested, Orlon?’ Skraivok replied.

‘Well, no,’ Orlon said apologetically.

As Skraivok walked, Orlon dogged his footsteps and began to prattle. ‘There is the issue of Captain Shang to address, my lord. He has rallied a large contingent of the other captains to his side and is calling for your removal from the *Nightfall* forthwith. I am afraid you do not have long to act before the situation becomes untenable. Already Claw Masters Alvar, Tjock and Denbis are considering changing their allegiance from you to he.’ Orlon laughed modestly. ‘Of course, they do not know that I have this information, but my sources are reliable. I can only assume that–’

‘What about the others?’ Skraivok interrupted him.

‘They remain unmoved by Shang, but events are moving fast.’

Skraivok rounded on the smaller Space Marine and jabbed a finger in his face. ‘Then get back to the “Kyropteran Vicaria” and keep the rest of them from drifting towards Shang, understood? The vote is tomorrow. Surely we can keep this contained until it is done and I am officially appointed commander of the fleet.’

‘My lord, I–’

‘Do you understand, Orlon. Yes or no?’ said Skraivok loudly and slowly.

Orlon nodded emphatically. ‘Of course. Whatever you wish, my lord. I shall see it done.’

Skraivok snorted. ‘*Kyropteran Vicaria*. How dare they set themselves so high. They have no right to decide who shall be Kyroptera and who shall

not. There was *one* Kyroptera on this vessel, only because I brought him here. And then I killed him. By right of conquest, I am ranking captain. That is the law.'

Orlon nodded again, but his words belied his apparent agreement. 'It will not be easy. Shang is against your plan. He believes the primarch dead and has grown sour. He wishes to hunt down the Lion and make him pay. He is obsessed.'

'Terra is our ultimate destination. Curze lives. Sevatar lives. Pursuing petty vengeance will bring no victory. We must go to the Warmaster.'

'How could you know the First Captain and our father are alive? The council might believe that the xenos device of the Ultramarines could show you such a thing, but you have no way of proving it – nor will you reveal exactly where either of them are.'

'I have seen Sevatar with my own eyes. If they have the information, I am more vulnerable,' said Skraivok tiredly. 'As long as it stays in my head, my head stays on my shoulders.'

He looked at the sword – not *his* sword, one could never own anything like that. Indeed, in the question of ownership, such artefacts usually went the other way.

'All this can wait, Orlon. I have something else I need to deal with. Tell me, where is the nearest voidlock?'

'There are the lighter bays two decks down from here, my lord. They offer the easiest transit. Do you wish to leave the ship?'

'I said a voidlock!' snapped Skraivok. 'Not a transit route.'

'Why, it is not far...' Orlon's voice trailed off in puzzlement.

'Then show me. Now.'

Orlon led Skraivok through the battered corridors of the *Nightfall*. The ship had been heavily damaged in its encounter with the *Invincible Reason*. Whole decks had been lost to fire and evacuation into the void. The resources of a conquered planet had been put into repairing it, but it would take years to get things right, at this rate of progress. Under Shang's order, they were attempting to repair the ship in memory of their primarch. It was typical of certain of his brothers, thought Skraivok, that they worked so hard for the approval of a being who did not care if they lived or died.

Shang loved Curze, completely, but Skraivok did not think that Shang really understood their father. The Painted Count had had little direct contact

with their lord in the past. Perhaps this detachment from his influence had allowed his growing understanding of Curze's character.

There were those in the Legion who wished to go their own way and reave, and those who wanted to reunite the scattered elements and hunt for their father. Skraivok favoured the latter. He did not particularly care for Horus' ambitions, seeing them as vain and self-serving as the Great Crusade, but he *did* want to hurt the Emperor.

The Master of Mankind could have redeemed all the sons of Nostramo, Skraivok was sure of that. But he had chosen not to.

That was what tormented Curze. The callous damning of them all to monstrousness.

A man should be most wary of the monsters he creates.

They negotiated corridors thick with scaffolding, Mechanicum priests, servitors, machinery and exhausted slave workers. Lighting and gravity were patchy. Plasma torches illuminated hellish scenes in phosphorescent clarity.

Skraivok pushed past, working his way methodically towards the outer hull. The voidlock emerged from the gloom of a transverse corridor as a fitfully blinking viewport and green indicator lights. Skraivok went to the hatch and looked inside. The lumens were malfunctioning, flickering on and off. Mortal-sized void suits hung out of their lockers, tools were scattered on the floor, but the panel readings on the internal and external doorways shone true.

'Go,' he told Orlon.

The other warrior frowned. 'My lord? What do you intend?'

'Freedom,' said Skraivok. He slammed his palm onto the door switch. The door wheezed open. Stale air blew outwards and he went inside.

Orlon remained. No matter.

'My lord! Gendor!' bleated Orlon, as Skraivok's purpose became clear. 'Your helmet!'

The door slid shut behind Skraivok. He inputted the codes to override the safeties. A warning tocsin began to honk, and a red light strobed against the dark. Orlon's face still floated in the window. He looked alarmed, and was talking, as usual, but Skraivok could not hear a word he said.

It was blissful.

The look on Orlon's face amused Skraivok. The ordinary situation of torturer and tortured on the *Nightfall* was turned about. Skraivok did so enjoy irony.

He smiled at Orlon and went to the exterior door. He mag-locked his boots to the floor, filled his multi-lung with air and, with one, careful finger, keyed the door open.

The atmospheric contents of the voidlock slammed him in the back as they were sucked out into space. An empty suit wrapped itself around his legs, the reinforced fabric flapping madly in the brief gale, then fell limp in the dead silence of the vacuum.

Skraivok stared out into the void. Deep cold bit at his flesh, blistering it.

Below the *Nightfall*, the dirty world of Argosi was late into its own night. A billion lights twinkled over a continent-sized city. Brown clouds of pollutants streaked the atmosphere. Orbital shipyards hung motionless in space, their long void docks encasing the worst-damaged vessels of the Night Lords fleet. Above them, at high anchor, a dozen more void-worthy ships hung as unspoken threats in the sky.

Skraivok grinned with cracking lips, and his spittle froze on his teeth as he hurled the sword out into the void. He struggled to hold on to his breath, but he stood there for a full ten seconds, watching the sword with slowly freezing eyes until it had tumbled out of sight in the darkness.

He shut the door. Air flooded the chamber, bringing the temperature back to tolerable levels. Then the pain began in earnest, as a terrible scalding upon his face. He felt as if his skin was being scorched off with a torture mask studded with hot needles.

But Skraivok enjoyed it. It sharpened his mind.

The pain receded quickly. The damage was superficial. His body worked fast to put it right.

The inner hatch window was covered in melting frost, and so he did not notice Captain Shang until he opened it.

Skraivok had not known him before he had arrived on the *Nightfall*. It was said that he had been Curze's closest confidant, once, and Skraivok could well believe it. Wild eyes and a face lined with internal pain hinted at a mind almost as crazed as the primarch's. Shang had a reputation of being strong.

But grief, thought Skraivok, *has undone you*. Shang was another weakling, and affection was his vice.

'Brother,' said Skraivok pleasantly. Two hulking Atramentar Terminators flanked the captain.

'He... he threw his sword out!' Orlon yammered. 'He looked out into the void! Without his helmet!'

‘You are insane,’ said Shang, flatly. His augmetic fist clenched.

‘I am not,’ said Skraivok, wondering why no one could see that he was the only sane one left.

‘I will not argue with a madman. You are not fit to lead.’

‘I have the strongest claim,’ said Skraivok. His eyes were clearing. ‘That is obvious, since by right of combat I have won my place on the Kyroptera.’

‘You executed a blind man. Your claim is weak. The Kyropteran Vicaria shall decide who will lead us.’

‘They will choose me. I earned it the same way that wretched Terran Krukesh earned his captaincy. There is no argument.’

‘Then we shall remove you from the considerations of the council,’ said Shang. He smiled coldly as the Atramentar moved on Skraivok. ‘You should have kept your sword. You are going somewhere very special. It has only held one prisoner before. You should feel honoured.’

The Terminators held Skraivok in their iron grip. A Legion thrall came forwards. Teeth clenched in determination, he jabbed Skraivok with a needle, and the Painted Count left the waking world.

The prisoner that the maze had been built for must have been important, and dangerous, to justify all this effort.

Frankly, he did not know why he was still alive. Maybe the existence of the labyrinth had tempted Shang, for the torment that Skraivok would endure within. Maybe Shang was genuinely afraid of the Kyropteran Vicaria’s response should he kill Skraivok openly. Either his actions were born of unnecessary cruelty, or of fear. It was to Shang’s benefit if he vanished, Skraivok supposed, rather than his bloody corpse be uncovered somewhere.

Nevertheless, keeping him alive suggested more weaknesses. That was Shang’s mistake. Skraivok would deal with him presently.

When he did, he would not be so timid.

First, Skraivok had to escape. He knew he was in some sort of maze, because the moment he had regained consciousness he had approached the open door of the chamber and looked out. Three passages branched away. He had taken off his gauntlet and tossed it over the threshold, certain of traps. Nothing happened, so Skraivok had scraped a cross into the wall of his cell and ventured forth. For the first twenty or so doors and forks in the corridor, Skraivok had been cautious, each time throwing forward his gauntlet. The result was the same every time, and so he gave up.

After hours of walking, Skraivok found himself back in the starting chamber. Everything was as he left it, with the mark he had left on the wall and the metal scrapings on the floor from its fashioning.

The only difference was the sword. That stood on its point, sheathed and wrapped in its worn belt, directly opposite the door as if waiting for him.

As if, thought Skraivok. *Not as if. It* is *waiting for me.*

He walked over and looked down at it as he thought over his predicament. It was prudent to assume that this maze would defeat even the mind of a legionary, otherwise Shang would not have placed him there. His initial foray certainly suggested that was the case. Without his helmet, he could not check his armour's status, but providing Shang had not emptied his nutrient reservoir and pharmocopia, Skraivok could count on around three weeks of nourishment, if he was careful. His body and armour combined could keep liquid wastage to a minimum. After food and latterly water were exhausted, there was the option of the death-sleep and encystment in a mucranoid sheath of his own making. In such a state he could survive almost indefinitely.

That took him out of the succession for good, since he might very well remain there forever. Wherever he was.

He needed to get out, and soon. The Kyropteran Vicaria, the temporary council that had installed itself to choose a leader, would soon make their decision. Shang had been among the lead candidates until Skraivok had arrived with Krukesh the Pale, so he had some sympathy for the former equerry's uncompromising attitude towards him.

'There obviously is a way in, and therefore at least one way out, or how would I come to be here?' he murmured. He looked all around himself. 'And yet, there is some art at work here that is beyond me. Technology?' He looked back at the sword. 'Warp-craft?'

The sword said nothing.

'If I take you up, will you offer me the route?' he asked. He expected the silence it offered by way of reply. The strange thing was, he knew that it *was* listening to him.

He had never dared wield it. Only once had he held the hilt in his hand: the first time he tried to destroy it. He could still feel the unearthly taint of it on his palm – though it had been inside his gauntlet at the time – as if his hand were smeared with an oil that would not wash off. Not painful, but certainly unpleasant.

When he had slept since, he dreamed of that taint spreading up his arm and into his hearts.

Before that one mistake, he had avoided touching it himself entirely, even gifting it to his headsman, Kellenkir, to be rid of it. Apparently, that was not what the weapon wanted, for it had returned to him. Since his arrival on the *Nightfall*, he had given it away a second time, tossed it into the ship's bilges, melted it in the furnaces of the forge, dropped it into a plasma field and, most recently, thrown it out of the voidlock.

Every time, it had returned. The sword wanted *him*.

Skraivok reached out a hand, hesitated and drew it back. To pick it up freely was to seal a bargain that could not be broken. He knew that as well as if he had been told.

It was also a chance at freedom from the maze, and at true power. He could reunite what was left of the VIII Legion and lead them to Terra, there to spit in the Emperor's eye for His lack of mercy and compassion.

But at what cost? Death, or damnation.

He chided himself inwardly for this superstition, though only half-heartedly. They had moved far beyond the Imperial Truth, now.

There was no choice. He reached out for the sword quickly, before he could start his vacillations afresh. He picked it up by the sheath, as had been his habit, but this time he undid the belt and fastened it around his waist.

Then he drew the weapon.

His arm tingled. That sense of *uncleanliness* came to him again, and this time it was accompanied by a sensation of weight settling onto his back – insubstantial as breath, but just as real. He felt a sense of triumph that was not his own.

That was it, he knew. The beginning of something unholy.

It was the last truly independent thought he ever had.

'Show me the way,' he said to the sword.

And for the second time, Skraivok departed the room.

Turn by turn, he passed through the labyrinth. This time, they did not return to the first chamber. He discovered that there were whole sections filled with laser grids, flamer emplacements, deadfalls, spikes that shot up from the floor and swinging blades. Before the deadly traps were triggered, the sword thrummed in his hand, imparting the knowledge somehow as to where the danger would come from, and where exactly he should move to.

In the darkest places, the edges of its blade glowed an eerie colour for which Skraivok had no name. It did not penetrate the darkness, but made it somehow deeper. Still Skraivok was led unerringly on. The sword tugged in his hand, drawing him down tunnels that he would never have thought to take, or that he would not even have identified as such. More than once he was sure it was making him double back, or return to the maze's maddening heart along paths he could have sworn he had already trodden.

But he had no other choice, and so he allowed the sword to guide him.

The workmanship of the labyrinth was exquisite, with gears and mechanisms subtly concealed behind every surface. Occasionally he would halt at the sound of distant tremors, as though portions of the structure might be moving around him.

Unlocking, perhaps?

For hours he walked until, unexpectedly, he came to a forgotten chamber larger than all the rest. In the centre of the unlit room was a podium, and what looked like a weapon rest when he regarded it more closely, surrounded by battered suits of power armour. Around the suits were dark stains, and inside were the remains of legionaries.

Skraivok walked around the bodies. Their flesh had mummified in the ship's arid air, turning obsidian-black skin a dusty grey.

'Salamanders,' he whispered.

Skraivok thought then that he could guess *who* had been imprisoned in the labyrinth. He lifted the sword. 'Are you showing me this so that I am more grateful? So that I realise I have no hope of escape without your guidance?'

He smiled. The weapon felt better in his hand than it had. Comfortable, almost.

He did not tarry long. He strode on, allowing himself to be guided by the subtle shifts in the weight of the sword.

Eventually, he found himself before a round vault door fashioned from gleaming adamantium, locked by eight bolt bars radiating from a massive wheel hub. Six skull-faced cogitator units ran in serial along the centre of the door, and a long array of illuminated red numbers were displayed in the view slots to their fronts. All were set to nought.

'Locked, of course,' he said. He looked down at the sword. Its sickly sheen no longer hurt his eyes so much. 'I do not suppose you know the code, do you?'

The sword said nothing.

Skraivok stared at the lock. The cogitator housings were incorporated into the door itself seamlessly. There was no input device that he could see and, even if there were, he calculated the number of possible combinations. ‘Were I to key them all in individually,’ he said to the sword, ‘I would be here, well…’ He laughed. ‘Forever.’

And that was only if the first failure did not come with a nasty surprise.

The lock was probably there to breed hope in a bed of despair. Skraivok was well versed in those arts, and refused to play Shang’s – *or Curze’s?* – game. It occurred to him that there might be more of this labyrinth beyond the door, and no exit.

One thing at a time. He must get through.

‘I wonder,’ he murmured, hefting the sword.

He prodded it against the adamantium. The point skidded off without leaving so much as a scratch. He frowned. The sword was powerful. If it could return mysteriously from destruction, who knew what else it could do?

With great care he balanced the sword point in the angle where the left-hand bolt went from door to lock. It was difficult to keep it there without the point biting into the metal, but he managed. He placed both hands on the pommel of the sword.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. ‘Get me out of here,’ he said aloud.

Nothing happened. He opened one eye then the other. The door remained unmarked. Skraivok maintained his temper well, having discovered in his early years that, in a world of murderers, a cool head and a charming manner opened many doors.

But they were not opening this one.

His concentration slipped, his mind replaying all the difficulties of the last six months through his perfect legionary memory. He grew despondent, but when Shang’s face emerged from the past his temper broke.

‘I am going to kill you, Shang,’ he growled. ‘I am going to use this sword to open you up from groin to throat, and I am going to make you dance in your own entrails! I am not going to rot down here. You will pay! You will suffer!’

The sword blazed with its unholy light. The adamantium parted under its point. With a grunt of effort, Skraivok levered it down, shearing through the bar. The resistance gone, he overbalanced and went down to his knees.

A mechanism deep inside the workings of the door made an angry beeping. Smoke curled from metal surfaces that bubbled and ran, though

they were still cold.

Skraivok remained kneeling, the point of the blade resting on the floor. He stood. Had Kellenkir learned the depths of power that this sword offered? He suspected not, or they would all still be on Sotha.

He lifted the blade. Seven more bolts to go. He cut the lower four easily enough, but the three at the top were hard to reach. Only by removing his pauldrons and standing on their unsteady surfaces did he have enough height to cut them. His anger grew as he worked, crystallising in his heart until it was as hard and solid as the blade itself.

A last effort saw the final bolt shear through. He sheathed the sword and stepped back from the scarred metal. He kept his eyes on it as he carefully replaced his armour. When he pushed on the door he was surprised to find it swung open easily.

On the other side was a narrow access way. He saw that it was formed by the outer edge of the labyrinth and the wall of a hold. He turned back and looked upwards at the soaring reaches of the space. The *Nightfall*'s lower holds were huge, capable of housing entire Titan maniples on the Great Crusade. This structure must have been immense to fill one so completely. As austere as this small, secondary hatchway was, this was a creation of staggering genius, and had been signed by its maker.

The outer wall was plain, but for a single, grille-mouthed, helmeted skull stamped into the metal. The sigil of the IV Legion.

Skraivok looked either way down the gap. No alarms sounded at his escape.

A few lumen work lamps hung along the way, casting pools of weak light. The spaces in between were thick with shadow. Skraivok could practically smell his primarch's touch. This had all been of his devising, at some time or another.

Skraivok drew the sword and advanced cautiously. The lumens and shadows alternated to a vanishing point, and for a while he thought he might still be trapped, and this place a part of the labyrinth's cruel trickery, until the bulkhead wall of the hold came into view, where was set a single door. He opened this quietly.

Two legionary sentries lounged at their posts. They were facing away from the door, and were probably intended to maintain the secrecy of the labyrinth rather than guarding against escape.

The first died in ignorance, Skraivok's warp-given blade bursting through his chest. The second whirled around, boltgun coming up. Skraivok cut through the barrel as it fired, and the weapon burst into flame. The warrior threw it aside in shock, conveniently opening the way to his chest.

Skraivok ran one heart through first, then the other. The sword granted him great speed, and the edge cut through ceramite as if it were paper.

He grinned as the death croak of his foe sounded metallically from his vox-grille. It seemed absurd to him now that he had feared taking up the sword.

He waited a moment, ears straining for the sounds of alarm. The area was deserted. If the warriors had managed to alert their superiors – and that meant Shang – then they would likely be a long while coming.

There was time.

Skraivok dragged the bodies back into the hold. He looted the pauldrons from one, replacing his own livery. From the second he took the helmet and covered his face.

So disguised, he set off at a run.

Just to be sure, Skraivok killed the Atramentar warrior outside the Hall of Judgement. There was only one, and his lumbering, clumsy movements had no chance of catching the Painted Count. He pushed the dying veteran off the point of his blade with one foot, then kicked the copper doors wide and stepped over the sparking corpse of the Terminator into the room.

At the centre of the large chamber, thirteen captains and claw lords sat at a crescent table of black stone. They were each illuminated by a cone of soft light, set for Nostraman eyes. The rest of the room was in darkness. Visor lenses gleamed in the dark like the eyes of nocturnal predators. Skraivok unfastened his stolen helm and threw it down.

'My brothers!' he said. 'I trust I am not too late for the vote?'

'Skraivok!' said the Exalted Terror Master Thandamell, coming to his feet. Half the others followed, some drawing their weapons, though Shang alone remained seated at the table, his fists clenched.

'Yes!' replied Skraivok, mimicking Thandamell's surprise. 'Are you not expecting me? I was supposed to be here, was I not?'

A number of guns were pointing at him. Skraivok was too light-headed with the mischief he was causing to care.

'Or were you part of Shang's little conspiracy?' He levelled his sword. 'I see he is sat right at the centre of your little gathering. That rather speaks to

me of a foregone conclusion.'

'Shut your mouth, Painted Count,' said Thandamell, coming around the table and walking into the wide marble area where Skraivok stood. 'If you were ever a contender for leadership, you no longer are. What kind of a man kills the sentry of the meeting he is to join?'

'I can think of a few,' said Skraivok.

'Just… just take him,' said Thandamell, gesturing to his warriors stationed around the room. 'I knew we should never have released you after your initial confinement, Skraivok.'

'It appears I cannot stay caught, eh?' he replied, lifting the sword smoothly to Thandamell's throat. 'You meddle in the affairs of your betters, Terror Master. You are no claw leader. Order your men to stand down, or your head will be the first I remove.'

Skraivok took a step to the left, scoring the edge of Thandamell's breastplate with the supernaturally keen edge of the blade. In this new position, he could not easily be hit without Thandamell being caught in the crossfire.

'You cannot kill me with that sword. It has no power field. It is a relic.'

Skraivok glanced at the slumped, hulking Terminator outside. 'Huh. It must be newer than it looks.'

Thandamell eyes twitched. He raised his hands slowly in surrender.

'Now, I demand that my claim to the Kyroptera be recognised,' said Skraivok.

'Enough!' shouted Shang. He slammed his hands down flat on the table and stood. 'Skraivok, you are not fit to lead.'

'But you are?' laughed Skraivok. 'You would have us throw our lives away chasing vengeance. Krukesh was actually right about one thing – if the Night Haunter were dead, we would know.'

'Then we should find him.'

'But you do not *believe* that he lives.'

'Whereas you would have us attack Terra, leaderless.'

Skraivok smiled. 'Not leaderless. Horus himself moves on the Throneworld. If Curze is alive, he will be there. We should gather all of the Legion that we can, and strike out immediately for Segmentum Solar.'

'And you would lead us in the interim?'

'You would prefer that our Legion is left as nothing but a footnote in history? More than half of the warriors in this room supported my claim

before you *arranged* my disappearance. You will not win by election. If you are so sure that I cannot lead the Night Lords, and that *you* should, your only course is to fight me. Take my right, by my death.'

'Skraivok, I do not want to kill you. You would already be dead. I have had ample opportunity,' said Shang.

'No, you merely put me out of the way for a while. Or forever. Fight me!' he shouted.

Shang's body language changed. 'You forget, I fought against the Lion and his best warriors alongside our father, and I lived.'

'Yes, you did. How's the hand?' laughed Skraivok. 'Have no doubt, Shang – I may not possess their power or their pride, but I have no fear of death, and that makes me more dangerous than any primarch.'

'You think they will be afraid of you? You are insane.'

Skraivok grinned. 'I keep telling you, I am not. I do not care if you live or die. Relinquish your claim, or I will kill you. You can be certain of that.'

Shang jerked his head. Thandamell backed away slowly. Skraivok let his sword follow him for a metre – he was exposed, but he was confident that Shang would not order him shot. The others would never trust him again after so blatant an assassination.

Shang drew his own blade as he came out from behind the table. It emitted a sharp crack as he ignited the disruption field.

'Think again, Painted Count,' said Shang. 'This is your last chance.'

'I have no second thoughts,' Skraivok replied.

'So be it.'

Shang came at him fast, his sword held in a double-handed grip.

Time slowed. Skraivok saw the blow coming before Shang had finished formulating his attack. As Shang swung at him, Skraivok stepped out, round, and spun, his sword skimming over the top of the captain's backpack, and cutting neatly through the skull.

Shang stumbled. His mouth gaped and went slack. His knees gave out, and he collapsed, the upper half of his head sliding free as he fell, spilling his brains across the floor.

A stunned quiet gripped the room.

'Did you see how fast he moved...?' someone whispered.

'None of you understand anything,' Skraivok called out. 'You are arrogant and narrow-minded. You think you know power. You think power is invested in the here and now – that it can only be won through violence, terror and

cruelty, the dominance of your will over the flesh of others. That is not power...'

He brandished the sword.

'We look down upon Horus' allies that court the services of the warp, seeing them as feeble idolators. But there is *power* in the empyrean, there to be seized by those who are strong!' The words came from his mouth, and in his voice, but he could not be sure they were entirely his own. 'This is true power, far above anything in the material realm. You disdain what you do not understand.'

He sheathed the weapon. Despite its recent employment, it was bloodless. 'Are there any more objections to my command? I have proved myself twice now. I will not hesitate to do so again.'

The others looked back at him. No one said anything. Thandamell took a step forwards.

'Hail Skraivok, first among claw lords,' he said flatly.

'Hail Skraivok, first among claw lords!' the others echoed, tentatively at first, but with growing conviction. 'Hail Skraivok, first among claw lords!'

'Congratulations,' said Thandamell. The Terror Master wore an insolent look on his face and kept his eyes locked with Skraivok's, but he still knelt before him.

Skraivok looked at them all. The sensation of weight on his back grew noticeable for a moment, then faded from notice.

'There are those among us who think the Legion is done,' he said. 'That stops now. We are not finished. Krukesh had a sizeable fleet, and he said more of our brothers survived Thramas. We here at Argosi represent a sizeable force, but we will find more. We are still a Legion! I give you twenty days to finish the repairs to the *Nightfall*. Redouble all efforts. Strip the planet bare if need be, and oil the work with the blood of its people. In twenty days we shall depart, and we shall be ready to strike for Terra.'

Gendor Skraivok, the Painted Count

THE LAST SON OF PROSPERO

Chris Wraight

‘It has taken me a long time to find you,’ said Kalliston.

Brother-Sergeant Revuel Arvida looked up. The sun was hot, baking the mesa, making the sky shake. Rock formations in pale pink and sienna-brown marched out towards an empty horizon, flecked with broken bars of scrub.

‘I do not understand why,’ said Arvida, getting to his feet. ‘I told you where I would be.’

‘The desert is a big place.’

Both legionaries were coated in a fine layer of dust. Menes Kalliston, the taller, wore full battleplate save for the crested helm that hung at his belt on a bronze-linked chain. Arvida wore fatigues, loose-fitting, white against the glare. His skin glistened with sweat. Away on the horizon, a line of gold-cranes flapped lazily into the noon haze.

‘What did you learn?’ asked Kalliston.

Arvida looked away from him, upwards, out into sunlight-blurred air. Something gauzy hung there, intermittently visible, caught like a reflection on the edge of vision. Look at it directly and it was gone – only in the half-glance could you see it, and then just for a moment.

‘The sight is failing,’ Arvida said. ‘Falling out of the world. I see stone and sky, nothing beyond.’

Kalliston smiled. ‘It will return. The Great Ocean has its tides.’

‘Or it may dry up.’

‘Does your tutelary give you no guidance?’

‘When I am blinded, Ianius is blinded. When I see, he sees.’

Kalliston nodded. He reached up to wipe sweat from his brow. ‘I wish I could give you more time, but orders have come – we are to make for the void.’

‘Now?’

‘So it seems.’

‘Whose orders?’

‘The primarch’s.’

Arvida resisted a little longer. He had worked hard to control it, the need to probe, the tendency that had prevented his ascension through the Legion hierarchy, despite the power that even Ahriman had told him he possessed. The Thousand Sons were a deferential Legion. A respectful Legion. A Legion within which loyalty counted for more than in most.

‘I do not understand it,’ he said, despite himself. ‘The Ocean is in turbulence – the few visions we still have are all of murder. The guard on Prospero must be maintained, now more than ever. Even you, brother-captain, have counselled the same.’

‘So I have.’

‘And so why–’

‘What would you have me do?’ Kalliston’s severe face creased into another smile, but there was something under it – a weariness, perhaps, or possibly self-reproach. ‘We make for the void. The skimmer is already on its way.’

Arvida looked away. The faint gauze flexed in the air above him, sparkling like sunlight reflected from water. Far out over the hard-beaten earth, the wind whipped dust into tiny vortices, suspended for a heartbeat or two before scattering into nothingness. The deserts of Prospero were changing, turning green as irrigation schemes spread out from the nexus at Tizca. One day the barren lands would be as lush as gardens.

‘Why now?’ Arvida asked.

‘He will have his reasons.’

‘Then he could share them.’

‘Will he live?’

Arvida looked up. ‘What?’

‘Can he overcome the change?’

‘I do not understand you.’

And then Kalliston was gone. Prospero was gone.

Only Ianius remained, hovering like a memory over the deeps, still sparkling in the doused sunlight.

‘Why did we trust?’ Arvida murmured, not expecting an answer, because he had asked that many times before, and had never yet had a good one.

‘Will he live?’ asked Khalid Hassan.

The chamber was pooled with darkness, so far underground that no sunlight had ever scraped across the wet stone. It should have been cold, but the flags underfoot were blood-warm and had been ever since the first wards had been broken. There were noises below, terrible noises, things that had not been heard since the oldest nights of the species’ unguarded ignorance. Never ceasing, they clawed at the frail edge of sanity itself.

‘Can he overcome the change?’ Hassan pressed.

He felt the weight of responsibility. He had been the one to retrieve the subject from the V Legion warship *Lance of Heaven*. He had placed him in the stasis pod and arranged the warding patrols that had kept the Wolves of Fenris from detecting the transport. He had promised the weather-shamans of the White Scars that this warrior would be looked after, that he would remain intact long enough for rites of healing to be undertaken.

The vow had been honoured insofar as the Thousand Sons legionary had been taken into the care of the Sigillite, but whether it was fair to describe him as ‘intact’ remained moot.

The old armour had gone, peeled away during a surgery lasting six hours. The flesh within was bloated almost into obesity, mottled with burst blood vessels and discoloured into coralline outgrowths. What had once been thick muscle overlaid on a heavy bone structure was now flabby, gilled, pulsing, slick with fats and sweats.

Many hands worked in that chamber. Orderlies brought in blood-cyclers and hypodermics, their faces swaddled in masks and their movements reminiscent of reverent monks. Robed adepts tended hissing respirator columns, their cowled faces never leaving gas-lenses running with esoteric data. Columns of incense rose up from strategically placed bronze bowls, making the chamber stink sweetly in a melange of blood and drained pus. Other figures, dark-robed, thin as whips, prowled the edges, reciting protective words in a language that had been dead long before the false dawn of Unification.

‘Will you not give me an answer?’ Hassan ventured, pressing the issue. The guilt hemmed him in, made his presence superfluous.

For a while longer he received none. The only one who could have responded was bent low with labour, just as he had been since the body had been brought in. His heavy cloak was damp with sweat. He looked old, that man, older than any living soul had any right to be. His spine was curved, his breath rattled, and yet the aura of power still curled out from beneath the frayed exterior, as if someone had tried to conceal the heart of a star within a scatter of rags.

Eventually, the robed man stood, unravelling, stretching out, until he seemed to stand taller even than Hassan. He turned deep-sunk eyes from the mire of blood. Malcador, called the Sigillite, steadied himself on the edge of the medicae slab, and drew in a thin breath.

‘His soul wanders on the edge,’ he said.

‘Of life?’ asked Hassan.

‘Of damnation.’ Malcador reached for a goblet and took a long swig, the clear contents tracing a thin line down his chin. ‘It never could be cured from the outside. Not truly. That was the curse of it.’

He limped clear of the slab, feeling his way towards the far wall. In his absence the masked menials continued to tend the body, mopping it down with unguents and drawing arcane symbols on the heaving palls of flesh. Huge piped machines towered over them all, whirring, whispering, building up power and feeding it to crackling ether-traps.

Hassan followed his master. In the years since becoming one of the Chosen he had witnessed many testing things. He had traced paths across the deep void, snatching objects of value from under the bow wave of the oncoming traitor advance, and that had brought him into contact with some measure of the terror that Horus had unleashed upon humanity. Of all of it, though, seeing the Sigillite’s gradual erosion under the crippling burden of command was perhaps the hardest to accept. The Regent of Terra was burning up, burning out, breaking himself on the anvil of the Imperium’s slow collapse.

‘We knew his Legion suffered,’ Malcador said, his breathing still shallow, his face sallow. ‘Even before we discovered Prospero, we knew they were susceptible. We tried to aid them. We thought it was some error in the gene encoding. I myself thought that for many years, and we expended much labour to isolate it.’ He took another draught. ‘It was not the gene encoding. It was something deeper in them, something that went to their core. In the end, only *he* could do what was necessary. We all believed that Magnus had cured them. His father believed it. Why should we have doubted it? The Legions always needed their gene-sires – they had been designed to go together, and Magnus was the subtlest of them all.’

Hassan listened. Insights into the earliest days of the Great Crusade were given out rarely, and there were still secrets now shared only between the Sigillite and the Master of Mankind.

‘But Magnus fell,’ Hassan said.

‘He dared too much. He was too proud. But still, even now, he is the only one who ever prevailed over the flesh-change. He cured his sons, once.’

‘With sorcery.’

Malcador shot him a withering glance. ‘Of course with sorcery. He was birthed from sorcery. This whole place was *built* upon sorcery. Give it

whatever name you will, but the time is past for pretence.’ He drank again, and the shaking in his hands receded a little. ‘I will not apologise. There was no other path to tread. Even now, even *now*, fate has not quite run beyond us. He is here, and he still draws breath. His soul is not yet lost.’

‘But… can anything… within *that*…’

‘He lives, Khalid. Even now. We still have time.’

The ship was empty. Its holds echoed; its corridors flickered with broken lumens. The Geometric *had come out of the warp too soon, too close, and now the shields were breaking, the engines were beating, and something,* something, *was trying to get in.*

Arvida ran down the longitudinal spinal corridor, feeling the deck flex under his boots. His breathing rasped in his helm, his hearts thudded a tight rhythm. He had been asleep, taking a single hour of true rest before duty called again. The warning klaxons had woken him, ripping him out of a dream where all the worlds of the Imperium were as ashes, wreathed in unbroken clouds, their continents turned to broken glass.

He felt sick. Something was wrong. Reality had flexed and strained. The corridor’s edges blurred and stretched out even as he ran down them.

Ianius was at his side, a diaphanous presence, calming him just by being there. He had forgotten if there had ever been a time when the tutelary had not been beside him. For a long time they had ceased to think of themselves as wholly separate entities. Ahriman had counselled that the companions were benign consequences of a greater understanding of the ether. But had they always been there, ready for discovery? Or had they been created somehow? Where did one soul end and the other begin?

Ianius did not like that speculation. It shimmered, shaking amid the sway and dance of emergency lights. Arvida found himself apologising even as he ran, requesting that it remain close, though he knew well enough that a tutelary never responded to reason.

A cacophony rang out from all around him – a hammering, a drumbeat of fists against the hull. He reached the bridge, and burst into its cavernous emptiness. Every servitor station was deserted. The command thrones turned slowly on their central columns. Out of the forward viewers he caught sight of a single world, lost in the blackness of the void, steadily burning.

Arvida approached the great crystalflex portal. Everything felt wrong. Everything felt false.

‘I never saw it burn,’ he murmured. ‘We were not in time.’

He whirled around, running his blurred gaze across the bridge. Screens fizzed with static noise. Augur-relays gave no information.

The hammering was growing stronger. Above him, the observation dome blister cracked. A heavy interior panel bulged inwards, impelled by some enormous impact.

Arvida drew his blade, and black flame ran along the edge. Ianius twittered in panic, rippling under the flashing combat-lumens. More impacts banged in – throom, throom, throom – *and the jabber of nameless voices began to filter through the damaged hull.*

‘He is my ward!’ *came a roar, suffused with the stuff of the warp*. **‘I have him under my countenance!’**

Arvida looked up, around, his blade drawn but with no enemy to slay. ‘Where is Kalliston?’ he asked, and instantly knew there would be no answer to that, for Brother-Captain Kalliston had never existed here either. The burning world on the scopes darkened, and the flames turned the dark red of old blood.

The hammering reached a crescendo. The ship was breaking.

Arvida felt himself dropping as the deck plates twisted, and he let the sword slip from his hands. Ianius ripped away, its silken haze blown apart by the rush of exploding atmosphere.

He tried to grip on to something, anything, but the universe was pulling itself apart.

The world burned, boiling the blood away into darkness.

‘We were too late,’ Arvida said, falling. ‘We never saw it burn.’

Malcador had moved away from the door even as it cracked. Hassan drew his laspistol and backed up. There were shouts from the other side, panicked shots, the heavy clang of impacts on the portal’s blast shields.

‘Behind me,’ Hassan implored, moving to shield the Sigillite.

But Malcador did not move any further. ‘Do not be foolish. There is not much that either of us could do to dissuade this one.’

The door cracked down its centre, smashed apart, its panels rammed back on their hinges. A warrior burst inside – a giant of a man, clad in ornate ivory armour, his eyes flashing with anger and untied black hair flying around his face.

‘He is my ward!’ roared the intruder, pointing accusingly at the Sigillite. ‘I have him under my countenance!’

Malcador bowed. ‘My lord Jaghatai,’ he said. ‘Try to calm yourself.’

The primarch swept towards him, as tall and gaunt as a hunting bird. His severe face was drawn with fury. ‘I gave you leave to find a cure,’ the Khan said. ‘I did not give you leave to bring him *here*.’

‘There was no alternative.’

‘Look at him!’ roared the Khan, swinging his heavy fist towards the quivering flesh-heap on the slab. ‘See what he has become.’

Malcador remained patient. The expression on his ancient face, drawn tight over the bones, was as cruel as it was perceptive, and did not waver. He reached for his staff, leaning on it like an old man would, shuffling across to the slab and regarding the body on top of it with something close to pity.

‘I cannot save him,’ said Malcador. ‘No one can, not now. He can still serve, though, in a manner of speaking. There is more at stake here than the life of a single warrior.’

The Khan shadowed Malcador, looking ready to tear the old man apart. ‘I have a blood-debt to him. My Legion has a blood-debt to him. We would never have left the void were it not for his sacrifice. And I *will not* see him lost.’

Malcador paused, inclining his head a little. The noises – scrabbling and rending – continued under the floor, locked beneath the fragile barrier of the earth and stone below them. ‘You told me of Dark Glass,’ the Sigillite said. ‘You know of the Thrones, and you guess the location of the greatest of them. There are walls in the Palace that have been breached and must be sealed. Your brother Magnus bears the shame of destroying wards that would have kept us secure, which is an irony, for it was he who was destined to guard those gates.’

‘Magnus is dead.’

‘No, Jaghatai, he is not. You know he is not. You met him yourself, on Prospero.’

‘I met a shade.’

‘One of many. The Crimson King has been broken, shattered like a mirror thrown in anger. It began when he breached the wards on Terra, and it was ended by the Wolf’s wrath. No, Jaghatai, he is not dead. He has become *legion*.’

At that, the Khan drew back from Malcador, warily. ‘What have you done here?’

‘What needed to be done. Just as ever.’ Malcador placed himself between the Khan and Arvida, defiant, both his clawed hands on his staff. ‘The son of

Magnus is here, brought to Terra by your hand. His sire was already here. Do not try to prevent this – the rites have already been completed, the protections set. It may fail, but it must be ventured.'

'This is an abomination.'

'I care not for the means,' said the Sigillite grimly. 'The gate must be guarded.'

Arvida stared into darkness. At first there was nothing to grip on to, just a blank void, hot and close. He could hear noises coming from far away, horrible noises, like screams pulled out too long until all the humanity had been wrung from them.

He felt his way forwards, and his hands pressed into crumbling earth. Up ahead was a glow, like muffled torchlight cupped within a sheltering palm. He was crawling, locked deep underground, progressing on his knees under some forgotten crypt. The air smelt foul and strange, and it was unfamiliar. He had never been on this world before, and had no idea how he had arrived there.

The closer he got, the more the glow of the light grew, until he could make out a narrow chamber hewn from the living rock. In it squatted something grotesque and enormous, man-shaped and yet far more than man-sized, hunched over a flickering red candle-flame. A mane of matted hair hung down its back, and caked soil blackened its exposed flesh.

Ianius was not there. His absence was an ache, but the presence of the giant made it seem somehow inconsequential. When Arvida saw the face – the lone eye, the thought-ploughed brow – a spark of fierce joy made him want to cry out.

'My lord!' he said, on his knees in the dirt.

The giant looked at him absently. The candle-flame burned in his palm, hovering in the air, a finger of fire in the deepest dark.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'Revuel Arvida, Fourth Fellowship of the Legion, my lord. Your Legion.'

'My Legion are all dead.'

'No, lord! No, they are not. I have seen them. And I saw you with them. I am sure of it.' Arvida paused, confusion slowing his thoughts. 'But then… How are you here? Where is this place?'

The earth shook briefly, disturbed by a tremor in the veins of rock below. Something like laughter rippled around the chamber.

'I do not remember you,' the giant said. 'Nor do I remember my name.'

‘You are Magnus, the Crimson King. My liege, I have suffered much to see you again.’

The giant took that in slowly. In the flickering light of the single flame, he seemed translucent, like a shadow in winter. His great shoulders were hunched, his armour tarnished. The sigils upon his golden battleplate were all burned out, as if someone had taken a torch to them.

‘That was one of my names,’ the giant admitted at length. ‘It no longer fits me.’

‘The others are alive,’ Arvida insisted. ‘They can be found. Where are we? I have travelled through the empyrean, and I have seen the new Prospero forged in the abyss. There must be a path to it.’

The giant made no movement. Torpor dragged on his limbs. He looked into the heart of the flame moodily.

‘Not for me,’ he said. ‘I ordered them all away. I left the gates open.’

Arvida remembered that. He remembered Kalliston telling him the command to leave had been given, but it was so long ago, lost in a world that had been destroyed and remade.

‘Why, lord?’ he asked, curiosity burning within him despite everything. He edged closer to his gene-sire, still on his knees. ‘Why did you do it? If we had all been there, the whole Legion, then even the Wolves–’

‘It was just.’ The giant looked tormented, confused, as if recalling things from a dream that had already faded from memory. ‘What they did to us, it was just. They were the punishment.’

‘For what crime?’

‘Oh, there were crimes.’ The giant leaned forward, closer, keeping the flame cupped tight. ‘I tried to cure you. I reached out, and I was answered. And then I had to warn my father…’ His lone eye suddenly lit up, and the flame flickered into greater life. ‘But that broke me. I am not what you think.’

‘You are the Crimson King.’

‘No. He is gone. All that remain are… aspects.’

Arvida remembered something then – a warrior in gold and ivory, long ago, who had told him something similar, but it was so hard to remember, for the noises kept making the earth shake, and he could hardly see, and his head was full of the laughter of the things that were trying to burrow through the rock and get to him…

‘We are on Terra,’ said the giant, lifting his chin. ‘That is where I came, to warn my father. The rest of me went back, but I remained.’

‘Then I can help you,’ said Arvida, urgently. ‘I can help to restore you. I can show you the way they went.’

The giant smiled sadly. ‘But you are not really here. Do you not see it, Corvidae? This is your death-dream.’

Arvida hesitated. He looked down at his hands. They looked solid enough. He could feel his hearts beating under his ribs, and could taste the loamy air of what must have been Terra’s bedrock, the catacombs beneath the Imperial Palace.

‘Where is your tutelary?’ the giant asked him, now wryly amused.

‘We are never apart,’ said Arvida, cautiously.

‘You are often apart. Until now you were apart for so long that you almost forgot his name.’ The giant smiled again, but this time it was crooked. ‘Such a conceit, those intelligences that whispered to us for so long. He’s close behind you now, and I can hear him getting closer. He’s pawing at the threshold. Do you see the danger?’

Arvida shrank back. ‘He was my guide.’

‘Or you were his. Come, you know how the Ocean is. Who leads whom? When all this is done, will it be that he was your tutelary, or were you his?’

Arvida began to feel cold. The clawing from under the earth was growing more intense. The soil began to tremble beneath his fingers, shifting like water.

‘I am not dead yet,’ he murmured.

‘The moment comes,’ said the giant.

The rock began to crack. Dust fell on both of them, and the roots of the world trembled. Arvida reached out, trying to grasp on to something solid. Ianius was gone. The flame guttered out, plunging him into utter blackness.

‘I found you!’ he cried, knowing how much it had cost, suddenly desperate not to lose it.

‘You did,’ said the voice in the dark, now growing in authority despite the collapse of all around them. ‘So worry not – where you are going now, I can follow.’

The Khan drew his tulwar, and the green light of the machines glittered on the curved edge of the blade.

‘Get away from him,’ he ordered.

But Malcador looked up, out at the arcane columns that towered over the slab, at the coils and the sigil-daubed ritual plates. The runes were glowing now, racing out of control. Ether-traps blew, showering the floor of the chamber with smashed crystal.

‘Too late,’ the Sigillite said, an edge of awe in his cracked voice, and he started to back away. ‘He *comes*.’

The Khan pushed the Sigillite aside and reached out for the medicae slab.

He never made it. The aegis broke with a scream of torn atmosphere, hurling menials to the floor and cracking the stone flags. The chamber’s interior erupted into eye-burning light, and the machines blew apart in unison. Hassan was thrown hard into the far wall, and Malcador was bent double. The Khan barely kept his feet, leaning steeply against the hurricane of raw energy.

Arvida’s body was swamped in a nova of numinous light-spores, his outline lost behind a howl and a shriek of warp-rage. A chorus of screaming tore out – the roars of a tortured legionary, the bellows of a far deeper pain, and something else again, all overlapped, jumbled into a fractured mess of agony.

Malcador gained his feet, bracing his staff against the maelstrom and squinting into the inferno. ‘The shard is here,’ he breathed.

The dazzle of ether-brilliance blew itself out, revealing the husks of destroyed medicae stations at its epicentre – a broken slab, and a lone creature, man-shaped, staggering amidst the wreckage. It burned like the sun, a white hole in the world’s fabric, writhing and shimmering, its shifting outline thundering like the planet’s winds unleashed. It was screaming still, its back arched in the pain of its reanimation, its limbs jerking, its eyes streaming with strands of curling plasma.

The Khan strode towards it, fighting as if against a gale. ‘Sorcerer!’ he cried, holding out his empty hand. ‘Come back to us!’

Malcador placed his staff-heel onto the chamber’s floor, setting it against the tearing winds. ‘No,’ he muttered, signalling discreetly to the cowled figures recovering their positions all across the chamber. ‘He must not fight it.’

At the sound of those words, the creature that had been Arvida suddenly turned. Its blazing eyes locked on to the Sigillite. It seemed to swell, to grow, sucking energy towards itself until it was nigh as huge as the Khan himself. It roared in pain and fury, threw its lightning-crowned fists out wide and sent

a wall of kinetic force crashing into Malcador, hurling him across the buckling chamber floor.

The Sigillite struggled to get back to his knees, his face streaked with blood, his robes billowing. The unholy creation poured its soul out in a maelstrom of misery and anguish, stripping the runes from the metalwork, blistering the bronzed casings of the cracked warp machines. The fires raged, and its empty eyes sprayed raw starlight, bleaching the stone as white as phosphor.

Malcador gasped against the cold power of it, but his disappointment was tinged with fear. ‘Enough. His body cannot contain it.’

At some unseen psychic command, the ruined devices roared back to life. The coils crackled with plasma, the ether-traps started rattling again. Great runes embedded on the chamber walls flared into life, and the surviving menials screamed out a broken chorus of banishment and protection. A shudder rippled through the air, and tendrils of black-edged force crackled out from iron vanes embedded in the chamber’s roof.

Stasis enveloped the abomination, crushing it back on its heels, stripping the air from its lungs and boiling it away. Malcador rose to his full height, and his staff now swam with overlapping layers of distortion. More hammered-iron runes surged into visibility, flaming in their stone-carved channels, their occult resonance drowning the furnace at the chamber’s heart.

The onslaught abated. The waves of shriving force lessened; the figure at their heart reeled. A rapid flurry of changes swept across its diaphanous outer shell, cavalcades of faces, one after the other. Its limbs flexed and swelled and retreated, boiling like magma. Its mouth opened in a rictus of despair, and gouts of boiling flesh-matter slipped from its churning shoulders.

‘It was worth the attempt,’ the Sigillite said darkly, moving towards it, preparing the death-strike that would condemn them both. ‘But it ends now.’

The sky was alive with souls. The dark rocks reflected them in glassy facets; the air shook from their elemental anger. Lightning as thick as tree boles, neon-silver, crashed among the soulstorm, fusing them, melding them, churning the sea of sentience into the raw stuff of Chaos. The stars wheeled overhead, faster than imagination, but they were no stars ever glimpsed by mortals.

Arvida held his blade, backing away, his heel slipping on the blood-slick rock. The spectre came after him, vast and shimmering, a glowing, fractured thing of pure psychic projection.

‘Why resist?’ *it asked, its single eye burning with cold fire. It carried a flame-wreathed sword that cleaved the air around it.* **‘You know who I am, now.’**

Arvida retreated further. On the far horizon was a dark tower, its sheer flanks riven by storms, its summit lost in the torment of the warp.

‘I know only what you told me,’ said Arvida, warily, trying to clear his head, trying to make sense of the torment, the whirl of energy pulsing through his veins. He felt as if he might split apart, dissipated into flying atoms, and yet his armour was still intact; his blade still hummed with a nimbus of luminous force. ‘And you are not what you were.’

The spectre came after him, towering into the storm-racked skies, its rippling crown snagging at the pull of burning souls.

‘I am potential. Just as you are, my son.’

‘I am no one’s son,’ said Arvida, and the words sent shards of ice into his heart. ‘I spurned those who would have taken me, and I never sought those I lost. Not hard enough, at least.’ His head was thick, his veins hot. It felt like he was on fire, being consumed from within, gnawed away by ancient magicks, and yet he could still stand, he could still hold a blade, he could still defy.

‘You have been in pain for too long,’ *the spectre said, sweeping higher, closer.* **‘Let it end.’**

He remembered more. He remembered the long, long nights in shattered Tizca. He remembered the coming of the sons of Chogoris, and the dragon-helmed one who severed the dark. He remembered the long war of loss, the tarot deck that he took from its master and gave to his friend.

And he remembered the path into hell that had taken that friend’s life, snuffing out a great and noble soul on the altar of survival. Through it all, the pain, the pain*, constant and unwavering, never letting him rest, never letting him grow. His only mantra had been to keep going, to keep fighting, never to trust, never to find sanctuary.*

There had been his friend’s words. I hope you can stop running now, brother.

Arvida felt the rocks shift under his weight. He half turned to see a crevasse opening up at his back, wide and yawning, falling away into

darkness. The storm crashed overhead. The souls screamed. The stars wheeled faster.

He held his ground on the edge, watching doom catch up with him.

'You have nowhere else to go. I told you – this is your death-dream.' *The spectre's profile sheared, sliding, flickering.*

'I did not fight on Prospero,' Arvida said, feeling the shame of it all over again. 'I had to live long enough to reach Terra.'

'You *are* on Terra.'

'And it is not enough.'

The spectre's sword was lifted now, its long, curved blade like the one borne by the dragon-warrior, and for a moment Arvida thought he heard the Khan's voice amid the storm, crying out in rage just as he had done when Yesugei had sacrificed himself.

'You have tried to preserve it,' *the spectre said.* **'You kept your armour, but the others who survived will leave that behind. You were the last son of Prospero, but it means nothing now. Prospero is no more, and all must change.'**

'Except you,' said Arvida. 'They wish to preserve you.'

'It cannot be done.'

'Then all is for naught.'

'Nothing I did was for naught.' *The spectre's blade disintegrated then, sliding out of existence like a sigh, and the ghost extended its empty hand.* **'Where is your tutelary, my son?'**

Arvida whirled around, suddenly feeling the lack again, but the black skies only screamed back at him. 'I never asked him what he was,' he said, bewildered. 'We asked them so many questions, but never that.'

He was tired now. The exhaustion of years seeped into him. The spectre came closer, reaching out for him, and the strange stars turned wildly above it.

'You know the answer, though.'

The spectre slid over him, draining his agony, excising it all in a slough of blessed annihilation.

'You are Corvidae. You have always known the answer.'

Even then, he could have resisted.

'What remains, then?' he asked, his consciousness finally slipping away, caught between the grief and the anguish of it. 'After this, what remains?'

'Rebirth,' *said the broken shard of Magnus the Red.*

The Khan leapt forwards, throwing himself at the rows of warp machines and crystal columns, smashing them, ripping out cables and demolishing the ether-traps.

Malcador lurched after him. ‘It failed!’ he cried, trying to restrain him even as the choristers scattered before the rampaging primarch. ‘It cannot be allowed–’

‘He was my *ward!*’ roared the Khan, shaking the Sigillite off and toppling a rune-scored column. He spun around, powered blade in hand, obliterating the rows of bubbling philtre vials. ‘He was under my countenance!’ The glowing sigils blew out into smoking lumps of metal, the lightning-vanes cracked. ‘And he will have his chance!’

The Sigillite moved to intervene, his staff making the air ripple, only to face the Khan’s crackling tulwar.

‘One more step,’ the primarch warned, his voice as cold as the void, ‘and your head will crown a spike on the roads to Khum Karta.’

Startled, Malcador pulled back, then snapped his gaze over to the reeling abomination.

‘Jaghatai, what have you done?’ he asked, his voice low.

The Khan turned to look at it. Hassan, dragging himself to his feet, gazed at it. Held in check by the primarch’s promise of violence, the remaining menials cowered in fear, silent and staring.

Freed of the suppression fields and null-wards, the agonised amalgam was moving again. The thing’s features morphed, running into one another in a fluidity of pain. Tremendous energy pulsed within it, spilling out of its mouth, its eyes, its outstretched fingers, but there was no control. It was a riot of purples, blues and other colours that had no name.

‘You know me, brother, sorcerer,’ the Khan said, coming closer yet, weathering the fires that spat and splintered. ‘You crossed the realm of the gods. You are *not* ended here.’

The creature shrank back, clutching at invisible nightmares, and the fires began to gutter. The kaleidoscope of faces slowed, until there were only two left – a bloated flesh-changed horror and a one-eyed ghost, melding into one another and back again with bewildering speed.

Malcador limped closer, a mix of foreboding and curiosity on his withered face, but made no further move to interfere.

The creature began to change again, blotching and erupting. Its skin blackened, burning with psionic fire, sucking inwards then blowing out in

smaller eruptions of blood and bone. Its screaming became truly pitiable then, a mewl of existential terror. Its shell flexed obscenely, as if trying to accommodate something too great for mortal bounds. Flesh melded, sinews knitted, bone cracked and re-formed, all forged under the white-hot burn of the undiluted empyrean.

Slowly, though, the overspill of energy furled back, solidifying into hard knots of matter. The creature crouched low, lost in its own world of destruction and creation, sporadic flames still running down its spine.

Jerkily, haltingly, it stood again, pulling itself to its full height, casting off the slough of suffocating warpfire, and revealed itself, at the end, to be a man.

He was whole. He was living. He had a stocky, vigorous frame, bull-necked, with an angular jaw, taut flesh over heavy bones. The sores were gone, the lesions healed. He was naked, all his tattered robes burned away, and his body was the slab-muscled hulk of a legionary. One eye was swollen, little more than a slit amid puffed scar tissue, while the other was hale. Power crackled across his new-made skin, a play of potency that hurt to look upon. The air trembled around him, shimmering like the heat distortion of Prospero's old deserts.

When he looked up, the agony had gone.

Malcador said nothing. The last debris from the ether-traps clattered to the stone. The blood-cyclers ticked to a halt. The devotional flames wavered in their bowls.

The Khan looked hard at the figure before him. The face was at once Arvida's and not Arvida's, at once Magnus' and not Magnus'. There was no primarch there, but also no mortal man. They faced one another for the space of many heartbeats, neither moving, neither speaking.

Curls of energy circled around the new creation, dancing like corposant. Slowly, it flexed its hands, one then the other, looking at itself in a kind of mute wonder. Every physical gesture was halting, accompanied by the extrasensory tang of the warp.

Malcador kept his staff held two-handed, ready to use. The build-up of power in the chamber made the air fizz, primed to ignite.

Slowly, the Khan lowered his blade. His eyes narrowed, as if he were scrutinising a falcon for the hunt. This was no shadow-primarch in a host shell, nor was it a flesh-changed aberration. It was something else. Something new.

‘You are not Arvida,’ the Khan said at last.

The figure looked at him. ‘Not entirely.’

‘The sickness?’

‘Gone.’

Malcador remained defensive. ‘Do not approach him,’ he warned.

‘I am not what you intended, Sigillite,’ the flawed creation said. ‘I know what that means for you, and I am sorry. Believe me.’

Malcador looked briefly surprised, then gave a wry, defeated smile. ‘The subtlest of them all,’ he murmured.

The Khan sheathed his blade, unsure whether he faced a comrade, a brother, or both. ‘What shall I call you?’

The creation looked up at the primarch and there was recognition there, a recognition that recalled the glory of the Great Crusade, a recognition that sprung from the ashes of lost Tizca. Some memories had evidently survived the process, while others were little more than half-remembered dreams.

For the first time in a long time, though, there was clearly no pain, and that changed things. When he spoke, his voice was soft, assured, bipartite.

‘Know me by the name I always had,’ he said. ‘Call me Ianius.’

THE SOUL, SEVERED

Chris Wraight

For every Legion whose fate it was to fight in the Great Siege, there came the Day of the Turn, when all other campaigns were suspended and all internal feuds put aside. On that day, on the Day of the Turn, the road to Terra was made clear at last.

There were those, such as Dorn's Imperial Fists, who had never wavered from their task, and whose part in the galactic drama had been written long before they themselves became aware of it. There were others, the scions of the Warmaster himself, who had never been anywhere but at the forefront, driving the shock wave of assault closer and closer, world by world, towards the prize they coveted with obsessive determination. And, finally, there were those whose way had been made crooked, halted by the vague malice of the warp or driven into blind alleys by the ambition of the damned, and for whom the turn would come late.

But every Legion, sooner or later, had their day, the dawn of which set their faces heavenward. Then the void drives were kindled, then the final arming was made. In the dark centuries to come, as the suns cooled and the old weapons rusted, they would look back, those who had survived, and tell one another: 'That was when we cast our dice into the maw of eternity. That was when there was no way back, for good or ill, and we knew we would not turn aside until the spires of the Palace stood before us.'

For most, the decision was made by their primarch, if he lived, and the legionaries would fall in behind that command just as they had been created to do.

But there were those whose sire was slain, or driven into madness, or simply absent, taken from them by the eddies of the ether.

And for much of the III Legion, the Children of the Emperor who had once been immaculate, there had been no word from Fulgrim since the hidden betrayal on Iydris, and that delayed their turn towards the Throneworld. They had always been a proud communion of souls.

So it was that as the Warmaster's black gaze began to shift towards what would one day become known as the Great Slaughter at Beta-Garmon, two praetors of the fractured III were circling the toxic globe of Horvia, their lacquered warships at high-orbital anchor. When the Lord Commander Primus Eidolon – called the Soul-Severed by those who both revered and loathed him – first beheld that world from the void, he laughed.

‘Has it been made for us by our new gods?’ he wondered aloud. ‘Did they fashion it from nothing, to be our glorious tomb?’

His vexillary, the Orchestrator Lecus Phodion, gurgled into a swollen vox-distorter. ‘Slaves,’ he murmured. ‘Slaves.’

‘Yes,’ said Eidolon. ‘But not yet. One obstacle remains.’

The bridge of the *Proudheart*, many-tiered and magnificent, was burnished with gold and jasper and chrysolyte. Lamps burned inside iron cages, throwing writhing shadows across polished stone. Eyeless and earless mortals shuffled from station to station, their spines clunky with implanted pain-bringers, their shaved heads bearing brands of ownership. The decks shook with the endless harmonics of the greater sonic engines below, chained down but never still, imbued with maddened machine-spirits and thirsting for deployment.

On a giant, pearl-enclosed oculus viewer hung high above the command throne, a swirl and a roil of smoke gusted across the mirror-glass finish, then clarified, exposing the gilt helm of another warrior of the Legion. His armour had been stretched and torn into barbs and swashes, the eye-lenses expanded, the vox-grille distended. The purple and gold of his ceramite had been war-damaged, the flecks of dry blood mingled with the blackened detritus of combat.

‘Lord Commander Archorian,’ greeted Eidolon, offering him a perfunctory salute. ‘You look quite terrible.’

‘That comes of fighting, Lord Commander Eidolon,’ Archorian responded, his deep voice calmer, more soldierly, without the highborn Chemosian flavour that normally infected the speech of the Legion’s elect. *‘Perhaps fighting is something you might think to try.’*

Eidolon chuckled. ‘I fought last alongside Mortarion – did you know that? I helped him find something he’d lost. And I liked him, despite everything. It is most invigorating, to spend time with a primarch. I only wish we had one ourselves.’

‘We have a primarch.’

‘And if you ever see him, do pass on my regards.’

‘We must do as he would wish.’

‘I know you think so. Time to finish what we started. How exhilarating. And you will lead us there, no doubt.’

‘We will lead together, until the Phoenician returns. Let us discuss this matter further – the planet below is neutral ground.’

‘You’ve seen it? What a truly magnificent hellhole.’

‘I will send you coordinates.’

‘I await them with eagerness.’

The oculus swam back into indeterminate, grey clouds of static, and the comm-link cut out. Phodion looked at it for some time before he seemed to realise that the exchange was over.

He turned sluggishly towards Eidolon, bereft of the combat-stimms that gave him back his mortal alertness. ‘You will meet him then?’ he asked.

‘I will, brother,’ said Eidolon, fondly.

‘On Horvia? And he will share command?’

‘That’s what he said.’

The orchestrator’s jaw worked silently for a moment. ‘I don’t trust him.’

‘Really?’ Eidolon hissed. ‘Then you must learn to, brother, for we are all of the Legion. Set the coordinates – I wish to hear what he has to say.’

The site chosen was an eight-kilometre-wide plain set in the heart of what had once been a manufactorium the size of a continent. War had come to Horvia long before the Emperor’s Children had, and the titanic mass of forges, furnaces and assembly halls had been turned into molten heaps of slag, still burning months after the original desecrators had turned their guns elsewhere.

Of the billions of inhabitant-workers, some yet remained, shell-shocked and desperate, huddled within the metal carcasses where they had once refined and processed chemicals for the growing Imperium. The machinery they had used was mostly shattered, broken apart during orbital bombardments, ground into the glowing dust by the march of rad-suited troopers. Any manufactoria that had escaped destruction now ran without supervision, pumping lurid chem-solutions into boiling pens that churned beneath Horvia’s permanent winter. Seas of arsenic hissed against coastlines of corroding metalwork, while burn-off towers still flared like torches.

Archorian’s plain was a rare slab of unbroken ground amid the forest of twisted iron and slumped storage cylinders. The earth was black, stained deep by lethal run-off. Sixteen of Eidolon’s heavy-suited warriors stood in the dust, their helm-lenses glowing lilac in the preternatural gloom.

At their head was the Soul-Severed himself, larger than the greatest of his followers, his heavy cloak rippling in the hot wind. His once lustrous hair hung lankly over skin held together with iron-black sutures. In enormous gauntlets he carried a glinting thunder hammer, and his breastplate was

crowned with a grotesque organ-grille. His throat seemed to spill out of his gorget, flabby and wet, ripe to swell into the sonic scream that had become his favoured weapon.

Those that came with him were of the Kakophoni, the brotherhood that had sunk ever deeper into Apothecary-inspired decadence, their organs augmented and bloated, spliced and re-spliced, pumped with stimms and drained of blood until they were somewhere between legionary and weapon. Their only purpose was to generate nerve-tearing walls of killing sound.

Phodion lumbered up alongside his master, his boots sinking deep into the black dust, and looked up at the northern rim of the plain. Like most of his brothers, he did not wear a helm, and his pale nostrils flared as he drank in the bitter air of the chem-world. ‘Where is he, then?’ he asked, his voice already thickening with the adrenal stimulus of combat drugs.

Eidolon hefted his thunder hammer lazily, peering into the drifting murk.

‘He is already here. Can you not see him?’

Phodion looked confused, peering up into the ruins, his fingers twitching on the fused controls of his organ-gun. ‘I do not–’

His words were lost in a sudden crescendo from the northern border of the plain. Echoing booms rang out like macro-cannon shots, rocking the earth beneath their feet. Towers toppled, crumbling into spoil, blown apart from the inside. Searchlights whirled into the sky, followed by tracer-flares sent up by mortar teams. A thousand pinprick lights emerged – helm-lenses, gun lamps, the outlines of III Legion tanks, artillery units and armoured walkers.

Phodion looked at the forces breaking out into the open, and spat on the ground. His organ-gun began to tremble, winding up to the volume that would rend flesh and break metal.

‘So much for trust,’ he growled.

Eidolon laughed, relaxed, remaining static even as the first bolts whistled past him. ‘I suppose we’re putting that all behind us.’

He turned to the south, away from the direction of attack, lifted his thunder hammer high and activated the energy field. The gesture was answered immediately, and Eidolon’s own legionaries emerged from concealment, building up to a jogging charge. Land Raiders shrugged off their cover and hammered into firing range.

‘I always hated Archorian,’ Eidolon said, turning back to face the enemy. ‘This should be amusing.’

His summoned forces moved up, making good use of Scimitar jetbikes and Land Speeder transports to close the gap swiftly. Lead units surged on either flank, enveloping the command group and protecting it from encirclement. The serrated crack of bolter volleys cut over the rising roar of engines, throwing warriors to their backs and sending flyers skidding across the broken ground.

‘So where are you, brother?’ Eidolon cried happily over the vox, crashing into the front rank of the enemy and laying about him with the thunder hammer. ‘You still wish to discuss the Legion command with me?’

His hammerhead crunched into one of Archorian’s vanguard, smashing the Space Marine’s breastplate apart and hurling the body high into the air. Then Eidolon swept it back, bludgeoning another warrior to the dirt.

On either side of him, the Kakophoni advanced rapidly, opening up with their sonic guns and blasting long corridors through the oncoming infantry. Archorian’s troops kicked back, as well-trained and equipped as any of the III Legion had ever been, driving counter-assaults at Eidolon’s oncoming surge.

‘You will not be allowed to usurp the Legion, Eidolon!’ Archorian’s voice came over the open channel, seemingly from distance. *‘Your pride was always excessive, but what you plan now is its own heresy.’*

Eidolon laughed, driving in the facemask of a reeling legionary before striding into the attack of the next. ‘So you still cling to that old corpse of hierarchy? You could have knelt at my feet, and I would have used you for… something. You’re a good soldier, Archorian. Just not a good master.’

Eidolon was leading his warriors further north, deeper into contact with an enemy that looked the same, and fought the same. Though they were taking losses, the speed and precision of their advance was greater. Stormbird squadrons swooped overhead now, unlocking their payloads and setting the skies alight. Contemptor Dreadnoughts swaggered into the heart of the fight, flamers roaring and claws rending.

Archorian’s forces began to fall back – a disciplined, fighting retreat, but a retreat nonetheless.

‘Fulgrim will return,’ he voxed. *‘And when he does, he will ask – who was faithful?’*

‘Faithful!’ roared Eidolon, cutting down a staggering champion and driving his Kakophoni further up the slope. ‘Faithful? This is what we cast

aside! Faith is for the sick, the timid, the ones who cannot endure the pain of transition.’

Archorian’s army began to disintegrate. Squads of resilient Phoenix Guard Terminators held the line while the main body of troops fell back into the cover of the great chem-storage tanks. The fighting moved from the open plain and into the narrow gaps between the holding chambers. Tanks trundled through, tracking infantry squads with their bolters, while the sonic guns screamed out, shattering ceramite and blowing apart adamantium columns.

‘So proud, even now,’ said Archorian, as his troops fell back further, ceding the chem-grounds and retreating into the ruined manufactories beyond. *‘It was always destined to be your destruction. Look around you now, and see the truth of it.’*

It was only then, leading the charge, that Eidolon spotted the burst-charges, clamped to the walls of the chem-vats, linked by cables and strung between hundreds of the towering containers. The greater part of his army was now advancing down the dark chasms between them, heedless of the elaborate daisy chain of bomb clusters. Just as Legion doctrine demanded, Archorian had drawn them into terrain where he had the advantage.

There was no time to react. Before Eidolon could issue an order, the charges blew.

The chasms disappeared behind a maelstrom of flame, rushing down the channels with a deafening roar. The chem-vats teetered, sagged, then collapsed, spilling luminous toxins across the legionaries in their shadow. Las-beams scythed through the cataracts, igniting and exploding, sending fresh flames dancing and skipping through the air.

That was the signal. Archorian’s forces turned, ending the feigned retreat and pushing back towards the burning chem-towers, pouring bolter shells into the raging firestorm. Even as the boiling slurry fizzed, steamed and slapped, they charged towards Eidolon’s reeling troops, the light of slaughter back in their eyes.

‘Now you see why you could not lead…’

Archorian finally appeared in person at the head of his army, striding down between the smouldering ruins with a crackling power sword in hand, flanked by Phoenix Terminators and hunting for his fellow lord commander. Maniacal screams filled the air, punctuated with the gurgling agony of the flesh-scoured.

Eidolon met him at the centre of the burning chem-zone, surrounded by his bodyguard of Kakophoni. They were all reeling, bent double, their armour smoking, their exposed flesh red-raw. The ground at their feet was churned into seething wells of liquid corrosion. Horvia's distilled foulness had crashed over them in waves, scrubbing the insignia from their armour and leaving what remained melted and distended, a sloughed morass of bubbling gold and lacquer. The Lord Commander Primus' hair had been burned away, and now hung in blackened clumps from a scabby scalp.

Archorian towered over him, his sword-edge shaking like heat mirage in the swaying air. 'Rise to face me,' he said, 'and I will let you die on your feet.'

For a moment, Eidolon made no move. His Kakophoni looked as if they were blinded, lost in a world of private agony, their exposed flesh bubbling and their limbs twitching. But then they stirred, drawing up to their full height, a jerking movement of terrible unison, as if some gestalt force impelled them. Eidolon grinned, and the tortured skin around his mouth split wide open.

His bodyguards started to laugh, first in scraps, then together – a hideous, unravelling chorus of fervid delight. The chemicals swam across them still, searing and scoring, corroding their way into bloodstreams and reacting with the soup of stimulants already there.

Archorian saw what was happening too late. He raised his blade, his command to attack choked by revulsion, but that was the last movement he ever made.

Eidolon opened his throat. Across the entire battlefield, every warrior of the Kakophoni opened his warped and bloated throat, and the air split apart with a death-scream that tore the towers down to their foundations.

The dust blew apart. The flames gusted out. Armour exploded, shattered by the harmonics that rebounded and amplified across an impossible spectrum. Archorian was annihilated, his body blasted into flying, bloody fragments. Those with him were atomised, scattered as if by a hurricane. Land Raiders rocked on their tracks, their machine-spirits fried by the deluge. More vats burst apart, spraying fresh fuel onto a growing fire.

The Kakophoni kept on screaming, letting their heads rock back and gulping in more of the toxic rain. Eidolon drank deepest and shrieked loudest, his roar flensing flesh from bone. The poison boiled and churned within him, refined by the horrific chemistry of his altered state, and he felt

his muscles begin to swell to even greater dimensions, pulsing like venom-sacs filled to bursting.

Once all before them had been destroyed, the Kakophoni began to move again, stalking up through the steaming cadavers, their lusts driven to mania, their appetites ramped up to insatiable levels.

Phodion marched with his lord commander, crunching over the remains of Archorian and barely noticing, his weeping eyes glistening with ecstasy.

'I can taste it!' he cried. 'I can feel it!'

Eidolon grabbed him with both hands, dragging his face close to his own. No icons of the old Emperor's Children remained on their armour – only nightmarish slurs. The old purple had reacted violently, turning a virulent pink and glowing into the night's inferno. Armour seals had fused closed, vox-grilles melted into liquid flesh. Everything had dissolved into the flux of delicious agony.

'This is what we do now,' Eidolon rasped, feeling his vocal cords burning. 'This is what we *are* now. You wanted slaves? You have them. We will burn them, skin them, render them down and re-fill these vats. Horvia is the beginning. We will create poisons that the gods themselves will gag on.'

And then Phodion was laughing again, screaming again, his lungs alive with the full agony of sensation. 'You are the master of the Legion, lord!' he gibbered. 'There is none but you!'

Eidolon let him go. His body throbbing, his eyes stinging, he staggered further up the rise, smelling the burned-pork stench of flesh beneath the chemical reek. He climbed and climbed, ascending the steaming husk of a once great spire, until he could see the full extent of the destruction wrought by his Legion. They were running free now, fuelled with the toxins that ought to have killed them, changed by slow mutation into processors of pain. They were siphoning what remained of the drained tanks, guzzling it, feeding it to their captured enemies, mixing it into new combinations. Soon they would spread out across what remained of Horvia, and the cycle would begin again.

As he watched them rampage, he knew that their desires could never be fulfilled here. Those that survived would seek out ever greater sensations, ever greater debaucheries. They would have to keep going, on and on, never stopping, lest what they had indulged in should kill them. It would take a world of trillions to hope to satisfy such lusts, a world packed so tight with humanity that even a Legion would take a century to harvest them all.

And it was then that he knew. It was then, with the clarity of the intoxicated, that he saw what must come next.

Eidolon, the Soul-Severed, who had once died and now lived again, understood that all was now accomplished that could be accomplished, and that only one goal remained.

The Day of the Turn had come. He looked up into the stars, already dreaming of the violations his Legion would devise.

‘And so to Terra,’ he murmured, feeling a hot line of acidic drool run down his chin. ‘As we have done here, so shall we do there, with the Warmaster’s own blessing.’

DARK COMPLIANCE

John French

‘You cannot conquer a galaxy by the sword, not in many lifetimes… But draw the sword at the right place and at the correct time and you can conquer the universe with a single stroke.’

– attributed to the Emperor, after the First Battle for Luna

The Court of the Governor of the Gilded Worlds

‘Hail, Desigus, Lord of the Gilded Worlds, and Warden of the Aventian Gulf.’

Argonis walks towards the throne. His measured steps echo on the long stone floor. Eyes turn to follow him.

‘Who are you that comes to us out of the night?’ asks the man on the throne. Hard eyes glitter in a gaunt face. Scars crawl over the man’s throat above the gold braiding of his uniform.

‘I am named Argonis, and I speak in the name of Horus, Warmaster of Mankind.’

‘Why do you come here, emissary?’

Argonis halts before the throne.

‘I come for your fealty.’

‘Fealty? Truly, you call it that?’

‘What other word would you give it?’

‘Treachery,’ snarls Desigus. ‘That is what I call it, and that is what it is.’

Argonis does not reply for a moment, but stares at the man for a long heartbeat.

‘You are a brave man,’ he says.

‘And you are–’

‘You fought on Tallisan, and were in the Halo Margins from the beginning to the end. You led the conquest of a star cluster, and cast down the idols of Mesunnar. This system is yours to command because you bled for the right.’

‘Your lips turn such flattery into poison.’

‘Flattery?’ replies Argonis. ‘No. Honesty. I know you, Desigus, though this is the first time we have met. I know your strengths, and your weaknesses. I know that you only let my ship through your defences, and me into your presence, so that you could look me in the eye and call me traitor. I know that you intend me to carry your defiance back to the Warmaster with

tongue to speak it, but without eyes to see, or hands to grasp a weapon. All this I know.'

Desigus gives a cold smile.

'Then what is about to happen will not be a surprise.'

'And I know that you are a man who never makes a choice lightly,' says Argonis.

'I have made my choice. I stand against you. Your promises are false gold.'

'Promises? I have made no promise. But I will now. Bend your knee. Speak the words of loyalty to your Warmaster. Give him all that is yours to command, and you will live.'

'Live?' asks Desigus. 'That is your promise?'

'No, my promise is that if you do not then this system will not last a single orbit of its star.'

'That is–'

'It is what will happen if I leave here with anything other than your oath of compliance.'

'No. Even he would not, the resources, the people…'

'Would he not?' asks Argonis. 'Could he not?'

'The cost in blood, in lives…'

'It can be done, and it will be done. All your realms, all your warriors, all the billions who you protect – all will be ashes. And you have the power to save them.'

'You lie.'

Argonis chuckles. 'I like you, Desigus. So I will give you a gift, one warrior to another.'

'I spit on your gift!'

'The gift is this. I will give you understanding so that you can make your choice knowing what you have chosen.' Argonis pauses. 'Have you heard of the Accazzar-Beta?'

'Why?'

'Because its story is one I would tell you…'

Accazzar-Beta

The emissary stared at Kadith, eyes hard in a blunt face. The sea-green of the emissary's armour was almost black in the forge light. The banner in his hand was a sheet of woven iron-thread. A golden eye stared from its centre,

and a row of rubies hung at its hem. Behind the emissary thirty warriors stood in loose ranks, weapons held low but ready.

‘What is your answer?’ asked the emissary.

Kadith heard the question. Tonal sifters mounted on his audio sensors parsed the words, and projected percentages of arrogance and confidence at the edge of Kadith’s sight. There was no fear in the emissary’s voice, of course. That was the problem with the Legiones Astartes: they were not pure enough to be machines, but like machines they had shed many of humanity’s imperfections. Had they gone the whole way, and shed the rest of their weaknesses, the Imperium would not be at war with itself. But that probably would have made them less effective. And effective they undoubtedly were.

‘Myrmidax Kadith,’ growled the emissary. ‘I will grant you a final opportunity. What is your answer?’

Kadith nodded slowly, and his halo of weapon mechadendrites rippled softly. He glanced from the emissary to where molten metal fell in from apertures in the temple roof. Iron columns rose from the floor amongst the glowing cascades. A figure stood atop each column, the height indicating the rank of the magos who stood on them. Some wore robes, others were hunched figures of plasteel and brass. Automata stood guard at the base of each column, their armour glazed red by the furnace light.

Information buzzed in the air. Had Kadith not shunted his entire noosphere interface into a dead part of his consciousness, the data flow would have been overwhelming. It was irrelevant though. No new data, theory or analysis could change the outcome of this audience.

‘My answer…’ began Kadith, his voice clicking and whirring. ‘My answer as construct representative of Accazzar-Beta, domain of the Omnissiah, is this…’

He watched a small muscle twitch next to the emissary’s eye. The buzz of data transfer had quieted across the chamber. One by one the machines and lesser initiates went silent. All would hear what Kadith said next.

‘Kill protocol.’

The automata exploded into motion.

Bolt-rounds hammered from the legionaries’ guns. The smallest automata were a blur of pistons and armour plates. Explosions burst across them. Kadith watched as a pair of scout-class automata ran on even as their carapaces became shreds of plasteel. He could feel the emissary’s vox signal trying to break free of the temple.

Siege automata stamped forwards from the shadows. One by one they locked into place. The weapons on their shoulders rose up and unfolded like the heads of chrome flowers.

Kadith heard the whine as the weapons built charge.

‘We…’ gasped the emissary into his vox. ‘We… are betrayed!’

The siege automata fired as one. Spheres of plasma thudded through the air and splashed down amongst the ring of warriors. Other automata were still charging forwards, heedless of the fire they ran into. A ragged wave of shots sprayed from the few warriors who had survived the plasma storm. Energised blades snapped out from the automata’s forearms as they struck.

The silence was total and sudden.

‘Warden protocol,’ spoke Kadith.

The automata clanked into a perfect circle around the still cooling remains of Horus’ emissary. Kadith stepped off his pillar, and the thrusters built into his frame caught his descent. He floated down, crimson-and-white robes billowing around him. When he touched the floor, he could still sense the heat from the plasma. He looked down at the heap of armour and flesh at his feet, and then looked up at the eyes of the magi on their pillars.

<Make the final preparations,> said Kadith across the noosphere, speaking in the pure language of the machine. <Horus will be coming.> He saw something amongst the blackened slurry, and pulled it free with the claw of a mechadendrite. A scrap of a banner woven with gold hung from the metal tentacle. <He has no choice now.>

The throne room was silent as Maloghurst approached his master. The banners and trophies hanging from the high ceiling shifted with the vibration of the *Vengeful Spirit* as it slid through the void. The Warmaster sat on his throne, his hand resting on the pommel of *Worldbreaker*, his eyes fixed on a distance only he could see. He had sat like that for the past two and a half hours, thoughts wrapped in silence.

Maloghurst limped to the foot of the throne and stopped. Horus gave no sign of having sensed his adjutant’s presence. He had of course. Nothing escaped the Warmaster’s notice, and none of his actions were without purpose. Maloghurst had learnt both truths many times over.

‘Sire?’ Maloghurst bowed his head and waited for a response. None came. ‘There is no word from your emissary to Myrmidax Kadith on Accazzar-Beta. It has been ten hours now.’

Horus' eyes shifted from one point of the star field to another, but his face remained as though carved from stone.

'What is your will, sire?' asked Maloghurst. 'Should the fleet begin bombardment of the outer system defences? There is the possibility that other factions on Accazzar-Beta may be turned to our cause if approached. They might even deal with Myrmidax Kadith and his allies themselves, if motivated.'

'In the earliest days of the crusade, the Seventeenth Legion would send heralds to speak to those who would not accept my father's truth,' said Horus. 'They would go clad in black, and with a skull as a mask.'

'They were infected with foolishness, even then.'

'Yes,' said Horus. 'But they had a point too, do you not you think, Mal?'

'That a herald ill received was likely to die?'

'Yes… perhaps,' said Horus. 'But they always have had a flair for symbolism. They realised what their heralds truly were, and what they carried in their wake.'

Maloghurst chuckled. 'The hypocrisy of the Imperial Truth, if memory serves.'

Horus shook his head once.

'Death, Mal. Death followed them whether the herald lived or died. Sometimes you need victory.' Horus raised his left hand. The blades of his fingers glinted as he stared at them. 'And sometimes you need a symbol. Find Argonis.'

'Sire, I must caution against that. He is a wayward creature. He has atoned for his failures, but can a broken sword ever be made truly whole?'

'I know you do not like him, Mal, but he is a rare breed amongst warriors. His blood runs with ruthlessness and defiance, but he also wishes to be accepted, honoured even. I have need of those qualities.'

'As you will it, sire,' said Maloghurst, and began to turn away.

'And bring all the fleet to full battle readiness.'

'You have decided then?' Maloghurst paused. 'Accazzar-Beta dies?'

'No.' Horus let his hand fall, and shook his head slowly. 'No. It will live forever.'

'Reaver Wing *launched and running free.*'

'Scythe Claw *launched and running free.*'

'Lupus Wing *launched and running free.*'

Galdron’s strike fighter dropped into the void on the dark side of the moon. Behind it, wings of gunships and bombers slid from the launch bays of the two cruisers that had carried them to the launch point.

‘All squadrons, come into spear formation, on my mark,’ said Galdron into the vox. ‘Mark.’

His fighter looped around, and he felt the tug of G-force pull his flesh. He blinked, and a view from the tail of his interceptor filled his helmet display. He could see thrusters flare as the hundred and eight warcraft of his group pulled into a narrow arrowhead.

‘Looks very pretty, does it not?’ came Scarrix’s voice over the vox. *‘Like a poem of blood written in the night.’*

‘Get off this channel, Scarrix,’ snarled Galdron.

‘You have no soul for this kind of murder, Cthonian.’

‘There is no such thing as a soul, you Nostraman gutter discharge.’

‘Is that all the teeth the one-time Luna Wolves now have?’ laughed Scarrix.

Galdron ignored the question and cut the link. His eyes flicked to where a squadron of midnight-clad craft coasted at the edge of the group. Lightning bolts of inlaid silver crawled over their wings. He fancied for a second he could see the kill markings dotting their flanks.

‘They send jackals to run with wolves,’ he muttered.

His lip curled, and he blinked the rear view away. The moon was growing large in front of him. Its surface was a black disc, edged by a thin crescent of red. Behind him, the fast cruisers flipped over and began their burn back to the system’s edge.

‘Approaching drift belt,’ he said into the vox. ‘Cut engines. Directional control only. Sensor baffles to maximum.’

Galdron shut off his main engines. Inside his helm, runes blipped between colours as his strike fighter became nigh invisible.

Proximity warnings chimed in the quiet as the asteroid drift swallowed his strike fighter. A vast chunk of grey rock and ice spun past him. He let his mind fall into a slow pattern of anticipation and action. Hours of this dance lay ahead.

Argonis waited, head bowed as the doors of the throne room sealed. Behind him, he was aware of the lingering presence of Maloghurst standing in the shadows. Around him the emptiness echoed. Only minutes before it had

been filled with captains, shipmasters, and commanders of every part of the Warmaster's forces. Now it was as though they had never been.

'You are wondering why I summoned you, Argonis?'

Horus turned from a viewport, through which he had been watching the blackness and stars beyond. The starlight was weak, and gave more shadows to his face than illumination. The beast pelt draped across his shoulders seemed marked by frost, and the gold and black of his armour was a sketch in the gloom.

The Warmaster's right hand seemed to be holding something small and so black that the light did not touch it. He reached out and dropped the small, dark shape onto the top of a pillar set before the viewport. It looked like a red pearl. Whatever it was, it hit the black iron of the pillar's top with a deep note that hung in the air. Argonis tasted blood on his lips, and for a moment he wanted to shout with rage at the turn of fate that had led him to where he was standing and what he was. Then his eyes moved from the red pearl, and both feeling and taste vanished.

Horus was looking at him, eyes dark and unblinking.

'Great events are only great because they are witnessed,' said the Warmaster, 'and today, Argonis, I have chosen you as my witness.'

'By your will, my lord.'

'So meek? I remember you with more fire in your spit, Argonis, or did your penance rob you of that quality?'

'I will never fail you again, my lord.'

'No. You will not.' The shadows seemed to crawl across Horus' face for an instant. Argonis felt his muscles and gut tense, as though for a blow. 'But you served me well at Tallarn, and you will do so again on other worlds, all the way from here to the Gates of Terra.'

'You honour me, my lord.'

'Honour?' said Horus coldly. 'No, I do not honour you, Argonis. I use you. You are a weapon, and a valuable one, but a weapon nonetheless. And weapons are only as useful as what they can help destroy.'

Argonis remained silent. The lights of warships came into sight beyond the viewport. Farther out, dozens of other vessels were already burning hard to reach their positions.

'You have questions as to this campaign,' said Horus. 'I could see them on your face during the war council.'

'I know your orders. I have nothing that requires an answer, my lord.'

‘But you still would like answers, would you not? Questions are like that – they make one unsatisfied until they are replaced by fact. Come, ask what you will.’

‘Why did you send an emissary to Accazzar-Beta? The scout and intelligence reports were already clear that Myrmidax Kadith and his magi would not comply. Why make the demand of fealty at all?’

‘Because I needed a reason for ships to enter the system and then seem to leave. Because I had to give Myrmidax Kadith something to focus on while other wheels turned around him.’

Argonis saw it then, opening in his mind like the fingers of a reaching hand.

‘The emissary was never going to succeed, or survive.’

‘As I said, Argonis, weapons are only as useful as what they can help destroy.’

Horus smiled for the first time. Argonis felt ice run down his spine. The Warmaster placed his hand on Argonis’ shoulder and gestured to the dark before the throne.

Cones of hololithic light unfolded in the air. Maps of a star system, battle pict-feeds and tactical projections spun into being in front of Argonis’ eyes.

‘Come, my son,’ said Horus. ‘Watch, and listen.’

Myrmidax Kadith sat alone in the forge temple. Not that he was ever truly alone. A web of noospheric data connected him to each of the other lords magos who were scattered across the planet’s surface, and through them to every machine and subsystem controlled by them. He also maintained vox and data-links to the seneschals of each of the three Knight houses who came under his control. Through this lattice of interface, he commanded rings of defence platforms and system defence craft spread between Accazzar-Beta and its three moons. On the surface, hundreds of Knights, thousands of automata and millions of skitarii moved to his will.

To another being it might have seemed as though he wielded the power of a god, but Kadith had been born on Mars, and seen the true majesty of what knowledge and machine could encompass. He was still just a component, no matter how high he sat in the hierarchy of the Mechanicum. And his function in the situation that faced him was as a creator of destruction.

<Ships detected approaching from system edge,> intoned a servitor across the noosphere.

<Confirm formation strength,> demanded Kadith.

<Estimate from full data spectrum,> the servitor replied. <Sixty-seven battle-configured vessels.>

<Recalculate,> sent Kadith, <and compare against previous long-range sensor information and marginal strength estimates.>

<Eighty point two-five per cent probability that approaching enemy force are not complete enemy strength. Truth is the Machine. The Machine is truth.>

Kadith contemplated the calculation. The orbital defences were already prepared. The system ships held close to the planet to counter Horus' forces if they broke through. The balance of probability was that the assault would fail.

Accazzar-Beta was not a forge world, but for the purposes of facing down an invader it was perhaps an even harder prospect for conquest. It was a Mechanicum staging world, a grand warehouse for materiel destined for other parts of the Imperium. It had more military resource than most star clusters, and its defences were enough to turn back a crusade fleet. With it readied for battle, Kadith had the statistical advantage. He just needed to ensure that he missed no relevant factors.

<All surface units,> he sent, widening the data transfer to the planet's wider noosphere, <potential enemy planetfall within two hundred and five minutes. Probability margin twenty-nine point seven-five per cent.>

'What do you see?' asked Horus.

Argonis stood at the centre of the shifting hololiths.

'Battle Group Castus in position…'

'Come about to six by three by twenty-four…'

'Readying batteries…'

'Primary targets locked…'

'Full assault readiness confirmed…'

Voices came out of the dark at him, snatches of vox chatter, orders from ship captain to ordnance officers, the muttered oaths of Legion warriors as they waited in the bellies of gunships.

In front of him he saw the planet and its moons flicker at the heart of the holo projections. Beside it was the pict-feed from the nose of a drop-ship as it slid from a launch bay into the void. It changed as he tried to focus on it, skipping to the view within a gunnery chamber, then to a magnified view of Accazzar-Beta's largest moon.

'I see…' began Argonis. 'I am not sure what I see.'

‘Yes,’ said Horus. ‘It is a lot to take in. The temptation is to pull out, to sort it into neat levels of importance. But that is a mistake. Look again.’

‘I see…’ said Argonis, his mind trying to find a pattern in the deluge of data even as he fought to stop it.

‘What you are looking at is the beginning of a spiral of cause and effect.’

Horus gestured, and an image of the space around Accazzar-Beta grew in size before them. Glowing lines and dots picked out where mines and stellar debris clogged the planet’s orbits. Two clear channels cut through the drifts. Great star fortresses marked the openings of both channels. Within the enclosure formed by the drifts of mines, more space stations turned above the surface of the planet. Squadrons of system defence ships held position around the stations.

‘Formidable, is it not? And, from a certain point of view, impossible to take without a long siege, and the loss of vast resources.’

‘Not to you, my lord.’

‘True,’ said Horus, ‘but that is not what you want to say, is it?’

‘Why are you doing this?’ asked Argonis.

‘The right question, but still not what you wanted to say.’ Horus glanced at him, a smile forming in the shadows of his face. ‘Go on, my son. Ask.’

‘How can it be done, my lord?’

Horus nodded, pride bright in his eyes, though if it were for his son or himself was not clear.

‘Let me show you.’

A gesture and the hololiths reconfigured. The clatter of data transmissions and the rasping voice of intercepted communications boomed out from hidden vox-speakers.

‘Course correction…’

‘Time estimated to outer sensor range…’

‘Coming to full burn in…’

Above them a sphere of projected light filled the dark. Red lines painted moons, cold blues the planet, and pinpricks of light the position of ships and defences.

‘Their defences are ready,’ said Horus. ‘Thanks to my emissary, they know we are coming. Myrmidax Kadith commands them, and he is a priest of war in the cult of the Machine-God. He is experienced, intelligent and ruthless. He does not make mistakes. In this battle he stands on the other side

of these events, and what is about to happen exists between him and me alone. If destruction is a child, we are its parents.'

The ship trembled beneath Argonis' feet. On the projection he saw a swarm of green ship runes thrust towards an opening in a cloud of red defence markers.

'Enemy defences arming,' called a bridge officer into the vox.

A sheet of imagery opened beside the battle projection. Weapons platforms loomed above Argonis and the Warmaster. Gun barrels the size of Titans pivoted to find their targets. Missile batteries unfolded like seed pods.

'Their outer defences see the bulk of our fleet coming fast at the sunward channel,' said Horus.

'Enemy defences are ready to fire.'

The image of the defence guns flickered. Weapon barrels glowed red, then yellow, then white. Gas vented from cooling towers. Horus was watching it all, his eyes bright.

'And a chain of simple consequence begins…'

'Enemy defences firing!'

The image of the turrets blanked to white and then vanished. Another took its place. Argonis saw a lattice of light reaching across the dark towards the ships strung out before it. Shields flared and collapsed. Armour ripped from hulls. Gas and fire bled into the black.

The fleet fired back. Macro-cannon rounds slammed into weapons platforms and tore them to fragments. Turbo-lasers sliced through defence ships as they thrust forwards. Spheres of wreckage and fire bubbled across the void.

'But the most important reaction begins within the enemy's mind…'

On the battle projection the idents of ships and defences began to flash. Data spiralled around the dead and the dying. Markers and runes blinked out.

'As the first shots are fired, a spiral of questions starts to form in Myrmidax Kadith's thoughts…'

Horus stepped closer to the holo, eyes fixed on the battle projection. The display zoomed closer. The markers of ships became projections of their hulls, all wrapped with tactical data. The view closed, sweeping past the fleet and down the channel in the defences.

'Kadith begins with the obvious question – what is really happening?'

The view spun, and now they were looking from behind the red lattice of the defences. The second channel lay to their right, the glitter of the

unfolding engagement to their left. Above, one of Accazzar-Beta's moons rolled through its orbit.

'He looks further…'

The view dived down the open channel, the images of star forts and defence ships blinking past.

'He looks deeper…'

The sheet of empty space opened before them. Argonis had the sensation of floating even though he was standing still.

'And he finds an answer…'

'Secondary fleet entering enemy sensor range,' called the bridge officer.

Luminous shapes came out of the dark. First one, then another, and another, until the Warmaster's second fleet filled the space. They fired as they came on. The defences around the second channel began to blink out.

Horus nodded to himself.

'That answer prompts another question to Kadith…'

The projection snapped and zoomed out so that the planet, its defences, its moons and the two attacking fleets filled the cone of light.

'What is the real threat? he asks…'

The explosions ringed the second fleet as it cut towards the planet.

'But the simple answer does not satisfy him…'

The view swung again, and the fleet closing on the first channel was now all around them, its ships looming large.

'What if the attack by the second fleet is not the true threat?'

The first of the Warmaster's fleets was almost in the mouth of the channel now. The guns of the star fortress guarding its throat began to speak. The explosions churned the vacuum. Values of damage and loss began to glow orange amongst the green ships.

'What if there is more than brute firepower and the roar of guns to take account of?'

The view spiralled through the fleet, flitting from ship to ship.

'He knows that I am here…'

The view found a single ship and locked on to it.

'He knows that I will be anticipating him…'

The projected image swelled into being before them. It was the *Vengeful Spirit*.

'So he focuses on the first direction of attack, and wonders what I am thinking and doing. But he is running out of time…'

‘Fleets entering sunward and edgeward channels,’ called an officer.

The shapes of weapons platforms loomed large in the pict views. The fire grew, white and orange beating against Argonis’ eyes.

‘So a choice becomes a necessity…’

‘Enemy reserve fleet moving from high orbit to sunward channel.’

The view snapped to dozens of ships breaking from their position above the planet. They shot towards the engagement in the mouth of the sunward channel.

‘And now true battle is joined.’

Orange and red blurred the projection, faster even than Argonis’ eyes or mind could follow. Ships fired, and dissolved in holo-smoke as they died. The deck was vibrating beneath his feet, and he could hear the *Vengeful Spirit* adding her voice to the roar of battle.

‘Taking direct fire,’ shouted an enginseer from across the bridge. ‘Void shields are holding.’

Sparks fell from the ceiling above. The images of battle were a blur of movement, and the blink of thousands dying in the gap between heartbeats.

‘Kadith is good,’ said Horus. ‘He has stopped thinking about his choice, stopped thinking about whether it was right. He is committed, and so he focuses only on the reality of the battle…’

‘Breaching party advancing…’

‘Heavy resistance!’

‘Taking fire!’

‘Reactor output falling…’

‘There are too many!’

‘But he has already made two mistakes…’ said Horus.

Argonis saw the runes on the display blink to warning amber as the Warmaster’s main fleet entered optimal firing range of the enemy star fortress.

‘From the moment Kadith began to ask his first question,’ said Horus, ‘he lost the initiative. He and all his forces are reacting to what I do. He knows this failure. Though he does not realise it is not his first error, but his second…’

The vast star fortress at the inner gate of the defences began to shed motes of red light.

‘But he can still undo the damage.’

A cloud of sparks spilled towards their fleet, and Argonis realised that each one was an assault craft.

‘Kadith is a warrior of point and edge, as much as calculation…’

The cloud of assault craft swarmed over the green-marked ships as they tried to turn.

‘He knows that even Legion forces can be channelled…’ said Horus, as the voices of a hundred battles erupted from the vox-speakers.

‘Hull integrity failing…’

‘Cut them down!’

‘Falling back to breach point…’

Dozens of separate pict images sprang into being. Warriors in sea-green armour ran down a corridor as one of the walls exploded inwards. Blank-faced figures of chrome and brass broke through the flames.

‘Can anyone hear–’

‘Casualties–’

‘Cut off–’

‘We can be battered down,’ continued Horus.

The face of a warrior rose through the projection. Blood streaked the front of his helm. A crack ran from shattered eyepiece to jaw.

‘We can be bloodied to the point that the tide of control turns…’

The warrior roared his defiance and raised a sword an instant before a beam of energy blasted him to ash.

The lesser hololiths collapsed. The ship was shuddering around Argonis, and he could feel her taking damage. The main projection of the battle was alone now, turning in silence. The two green fleets were bright with damage data. The red of the defences seemed clamped around the fleets like jaws, chewing them, grinding them to fire and dust.

‘Kadith is winning. But then his first mistake comes to undo his effort…’

The sphere of Accazzar-Beta’s moon rolled across the image.

‘The moment he saw our forces he began to question – what was real and what was a feint? What had I anticipated? What was I doing?’

Horus stepped amongst the turning image, projections of ships and star fortresses scanned across his features.

‘That is the problem with questions – if you receive an answer, the mind tends to think that there is nothing more. You focus on the answer…’ Argonis followed the Warmaster’s gaze, and looked at the projection of the

moon in time to see a hundred tiny green markers flash into being. ‘And you forget the question.’

‘Weapons free. All squadrons full burn.’

Galdron ignited his main engine as he came out of the shadow of the moon. His muscles slammed against the back of his armour as the engines screamed. The strait between the moon and Accazzar-Beta sparkled with detonations and weapons fire. Clouds of burning gas marked the largest ships. As he watched, a Nova shell detonation shattered into being close to the planet. It was peaceful in a way, distant, separate.

Targeting warnings filled his ears.

‘They see us!’ came Scarrix’s voice across the vox.

‘All wings, launch torpedoes,’ said Galdron.

Torpedoes cut past him as the bombers loosed their payloads. His strike fighter shook as it burned to keep pace with them. Behind him the bombers were peeling away, breaking for the open void, their work done. Locked into the targeting spirit of each torpedo was a specific component of the planet’s defences. Layers of redundancy were built into the targeting and launch pattern. Even if the defenders shot half of them out of the void, the remainder would be enough. More than enough.

And Galdron had no intention of letting the defenders do even that much damage.

Explosions burst close by, their fire stealing the dark of the void. He saw a glitter as squadrons of enemy fighters launched to meet them.

He opened the vox to Scarrix, and gave his order.

‘Nostraman, your time is now.’

‘As the Warmaster wills.’

Scarrix’s wing dropped and thrust forwards, engines running raw and white. The lead Night Lords craft were strike fighters, all engine power and weapon payload. Behind them were the gunships, their guts heavy with squads of midnight-clad warriors. Their purpose was not precision, or domination; it was anarchy and terror. In the old, murdered age of the Great Crusade they had a reputation that followed them like a muttered curse. Now, in this new war, their skill had earned them a place at the Warmaster’s side.

Galdron cut the broad vox-pickup an instant before it began to scream. Static and corrosive code flooded into the signal manifold as Scarrix’s wing shrieked towards their prey. All order vanished as each squadron chose its

own target and bore down on it. Galdron watched as the defenders' craft split to meet the Night Lords.

Turrets on ships and platforms turned, and hammered the blackness with threads of cannon fire. The Night Lords spun through the fire, bombs and rockets scattering for them as they skimmed the skins of warships. Gunships landed in wounds blasted in cliffs of armour plating, and the murder-terror squads poured in. Screams filled Galdron's ears as the Night Lords channelled the sounds of slaughter across the vox-net. He switched frequencies.

Scarrix's delight in massacre was wasteful, but was serving its purpose: all but a few elements of the defence had switched to countering the Night Lords' onslaught. Galdron and the rest of his flight were free, and the torpedoes they guarded were running true to their targets. They just had a little further to go.

'Incoming fighters,' said Galdron into the vox. 'All squadrons engage.'

His helm was suddenly a swarm of threat markers and target runes. A warning rang in his ears, and he spun sideways an instant before las-fire tore through the space where he had been. A quad-winged craft of chrome and crimson screamed by, tumbling as it skidded past. Galdron's hands moved before the impulse to kill reached his awareness. His lascannons fired once, and the red-and-chrome craft became a splash of fire. He glanced at his auspex. Lines and runes tangled across the screen. Secondary data pulsed in his helmet display. He assimilated it all in a heartbeat. The torpedoes were running ahead, rockets burning brighter as they sped through the last seconds of their lives.

But even as he watched, a squall of fire reached out from a weapons platform, and touched one of the warheads.

There was a brief, agonising jump in time. Then reality shrieked. A hole opened in space, darker than the void. The sheet of stars and light spun around it. Galdron's eyes clamped shut an instant later. His hearts were racing, head spinning, throat and mouth filled with the taste of acid and blood. Sound drained from his ears. He was floating, feeling the tug and kick of the interceptor as it corkscrewed on…

And at the back of his thoughts he could hear voices shouting, pleading, crying…

His eyes snapped open. A hole in existence roared in the void where the torpedo had detonated. Beside it the light of battle seemed dim, almost

serene in its fury. He pulled his eyes to his sensor displays. The remaining vortex torpedoes were still loose and alive. But not for long. Battery fire poured out from star forts and ships, as the defenders realised what they were facing. Every enemy craft pulled out of their engagements. And bore down on the remaining torpedoes.

‘All squadrons,’ said Galdron. ‘Pull in.’

He was spinning and firing without thinking now. The machine-spirit of his strike fighter began to count down the distance until the torpedoes impacted.

‘Five hundred…’ The sound of his strike fighter’s targeting system filled his ears.

‘Four hundred…’

A fighter exploded in front of him. Debris rang against his canopy as he thrust through the fire cloud.

‘Three hundred…’

Something struck his wing, and suddenly he was rolling over and over, stars and gunfire a blur across his eyes.

‘Two hundred…’

A fuel line exploded, and he felt his tail and wing shear off. The sensor data was still clear in his eyes.

‘One hundred…’

The last thing Galdron saw was a frozen image of stars washed with the fire of dying war-ships and spinning fighters…

Then the first torpedo struck the largest star fort and detonated.

Argonis stared at the battle projection. Where the enemy defences had been there was… a wound. The Warmaster’s twin fleets were through the channels and the defences were blinking out one by one.

Horus turned his gaze from the projection to Argonis.

‘Do you see now?’ asked the Warmaster.

‘How many vortex torpedoes did those squadrons carry?’ asked Argonis, trying to keep the shock from his voice.

‘Sixteen. Thirteen struck their targets.’

‘Galdron’s wings, the fighter craft and gunships…’

‘You know war, Argonis, and you know what is required to do what others claim is impossible.’

Argonis paused, feeling blood pulse cold in his hearts.

‘Sacrifice,’ he said.

‘Correct,’ said the Warmaster, ‘but that is only a beginning.’

<Orbital defence sphere collapse,> transmitted the lexmechanics into Kadith’s data stream. <Enemy void domination estimated at ninety-eight point eight-seven per cent. The Machine is the summation of understanding.>

Kadith parsed the meaning of the data, but he already knew the truth. The cogitated assessment was just the final confirmation.

<All surface units,> he intoned, <prepare for global enemy planetfall.>

Even as he finished he heard the temple structure begin to shake, as the batteries on its roof and spires began to hammer the atmosphere. The lights of the cogitator stacks dimmed as power surged to keep the void shields in place. And all across the planet, machines would be striding out to do war beneath the dome of the burning sky. The doors of forges would be opening to pour hundreds and thousands of tech-thralls onto the rad plains. The Knights would be walking, and the blessed ordinatus would be rolling from caverns beneath the surface.

<Project likely outcome of ground warfare,> he commanded. <Single most probable outcome.>

<Cogitating…>

Kadith waited. He knew the answer. His biological and mechanical components were capable of tactical calculations to the fiftieth order of complexity. But information of a higher fidelity was a blessing of the Omnissiah, and so he waited while the temple’s systems confirmed his doom.

<Cogitation complete. Most probable outcome of ground warfare – defeat following prolonged conflict. Duration two to six months. Enemy forces degraded by seventy point eight-seven per cent by close of conflict. Projection has a probability rating of seventy-one point four-three per cent. The loss of knowledge is true sorrow.>

Kadith was silent for a second. It was as he had calculated, though his own probabilities ran slightly higher, and the time it would take Horus to subdue the planet slightly longer. He wondered, as he had before, if that was the influence of the meat of his brain leeching into his logic. No matter, the next step he had to take was the same. He had to make the Warmaster pay as high a cost as possible for taking his world.

<Tagmata manifold activate,> he transmitted, as he stepped from the top of his pillar. The suspensors built into his body caught him as he began to

fall, and he floated down to the floor.

Automata marched from the shadows of pillars, and unfolded from niches in the walls. His myrmidons came with them, robes swirling after them as they stalked forwards. They fell in around him, their ranks forming perfect diamonds, squares and circles. The buzz of their charging weapons hummed beside the clatter of code commands. Before them the doors of the temple began to grind open.

<War protocol initiated,> he transmitted and then switched to the audio simulator built into his throat. ‘The Machine is god. God is the Machine,’ he said to himself.

The Warmaster looked down on the world. Fire bubbled across its face, crawling in pinprick denotations beneath a shroud of smoke. Space above it crowded with ships and the glowing dots of descending landers and drop pods. The *Vengeful Spirit* sat over the unfolding destruction like an enthroned queen. Her guns spoke without cease. The flash of their firing blinked across Horus’ face.

‘Almost, but not enough,’ said the Warmaster. ‘Not yet.’

‘My lord?’ asked Argonis.

Horus turned his face from the viewport. The battle projections hung in the air behind them, muted and unnoticed now, their glimpses of battle discarded.

‘I will go to the surface. You will accompany me, Argonis.’

Argonis swallowed, and found his throat dry. The Warmaster was staring at him, his eyes holes in an unmoving face. Shadows and silence had crept over him as the battle had progressed, and the first forces had landed on the surface. Horus had watched and listened to a feed of the first drop pod landing. The sound of the first shots had rung through the throne room, booming and echoing like a gong struck in an empty temple. The blood of the first to die had flicked through the holo-light, bright and clear.

Horus had watched it all, but then turned away and gone to the viewport and said not a word, and beside him Argonis had felt as though something were growing around and beyond him. Something he could not see, but could sense. As though he were feeling heat bleed from behind a furnace door.

‘I commanded you to speak your thoughts,’ said Horus.

‘The battle has only just begun,’ said Argonis, forcing the words to come from his mouth, ‘and you have already said that you will not lead a spear

strike against the defenders' command. If that is so, then why–'

'I am not going down to this world to kill its rulers. I am going down to destroy it utterly.'

Argonis turned at the buzz of active armour. Figures in black stood around them as though they had stepped from the dark. He saw Maloghurst amongst them, his twisted frame seeming small beside the Justaerin Terminators. Horus did not look at them, but reached out and picked up the red pearl, which had lain on its iron dais since Argonis had entered the chamber. The light around it curdled, and it flickered, its size and shape for a moment impossible to process. Horus closed his fingers around it, and strode towards the throne room's doors.

'Follow,' said the Warmaster.

Myrmidax Kadith stepped from his temple into a burning world. The sky above was a dome of grey streaked with fire. Black smoke hid the distance. Void shields crackled and snapped above the spires of data-shrines and bastions.

Two and a half kilometres away, twelve Knights of the House of Kratogen stood atop the ruins of a bastion wall. Their guns fired without cease, the spirits of their machines calling out as their power drained.

Five thousand and fifty kilometres to the west, three thousand skitarii met the first waves of enemy with a wall of perfectly timed fire.

On the other side of the planet, Magos Hekot-Sul sent a last command to his forge reactors as he died. The explosions swallowed thousands of attackers in an instant.

Kadith knew all this, and knew that his own battle would come.

<Lock positions,> transmitted Kadith, and his personal cohort locked into formation, fields of fire overlapping many times. Above them the canopy of void shields glittered in layers. Defence lasers spat at targets beyond sight.

Horus would come for him. That was the way of the Warmaster, a trait that echoed through the records of his battles in the Great Crusade. He would come to remove Kadith in person, and so end a battle. Kadith would die. But that did not matter. Command would pass down the hierarchy of control, and the next command node would become the will of the Machine-God on Accazzar-Beta. Horus was going to have to take every inch of the planet by blood. And flesh was weaker than iron.

The black-and-gold Stormbird howled as it cut through Accazzar-Beta's atmosphere. Five interceptors peeled away and began to circle.

Two smaller gunships dropped faster, their guns rotating to lace the ruins around a circle of open ground. Their hatches slid open. Armoured figures leapt into the air, jump packs igniting as they fell. They landed in the ruins an instant before the gunships stopped firing. Creatures clinging to life in the wreckage died.

The Stormbird banked and rocked in the air, hanging on the downdraught of its thrusters. Skins of energy crackled around it as the wind blew cinders into its void shields.

Within its compartment, Argonis checked his weapons for a last time. Horus stood before the assault ramp, unhelmed, *Worldbreaker* in one hand, the talon blades of the other wrapped around the red pearl.

From this close, the presence of the Warmaster and the pearl were like a hammer beating against the inside of Argonis' skull. His muscles were vibrating, and he had to swallow the urge to howl. He willed the hatch to open, so that he could see the burning land beyond, and feel blood on his hands…

'Steady, my sons,' said Horus, as though hearing Argonis' thoughts, and spared a glance behind him as the Stormbird dropped lower.

The hatch began to open. Light reached in through the broadening crack, and then a vista of iron spires and glowing fires filled Argonis' eyes. The Stormbird settled to the ground. Dust billowed into the air. Horus paused for an instant, and then stepped down the ramp, and onto the surface of Accazzar-Beta. The Justaerin charged out, and encircled the Stormbird. Argonis followed them.

It was almost silent, the sounds of battle distant. No gunfire reached from the ruins, and no enemy charged to greet them. Argonis checked his stride.

'Where is the enemy, my lord?' asked Argonis.

'The nearest living enemy is twenty kilometres away,' replied the Warmaster. 'This location holds no strategic importance. It is insignificant in every way. Until now.'

The Warmaster extended his taloned hand out in front of him. Red light pulsed between the blades. The air began to spiral. Argonis shivered. Beside him the Justaerin stepped back, turning to look around them, weapons searching for targets. Ghost voices rose on the wind. Argonis felt liquid on his lips, tasted iron on his tongue. Ashes and dust were rising from the ground, and spinning into the air in smears of black and red. The light of the distant explosions grew brighter. Shadows spread across the ground. Argonis

felt himself shiver; he felt weak, hunted. The voice of the wind beat down on him. He watched as the Justaerin twitched, their muscles spasming.

Only the Warmaster remained still. Red light was crawling from between his fingers, and reaching into the air. His face was an impression pressed into shadow.

‘Come from the dark, Doombreed. I call you to my side. I give you this world. Come, take it from my hand. Feed.’

Horus opened his hand, and the red pearl fell.

Stillness rushed inwards. High above, the light of orbital battles shone brighter than stars. The red of distant fires swallowed other colours. Shadows became smoke. A reek of burning sugar and raw meat flooded Argonis’ mouth. A shape was rising from the ground before him, forming as it grew. Ash clotted into a vast hound’s skull. Darkness folded into matted fur. The light of fires congealed into muscle. Wings scattered blood as they folded, and beat against the gale. Open jaws tilted upwards, and roared at the sky.

Horus looked up at the daemon, his face unchanging. The daemon’s roar ended, and it looked down at Horus. Fire burned in the holes that were its eyes. Molten iron and blood dripped from its jaws and the head of its axe. Argonis could feel his muscles bunching, and blood running from his eyes and mouth. Horus tilted his head and flicked a finger at the horizon.

‘Go,’ said the Warmaster, ‘and do my will.’

The creature called Doombreed snarled, and it took to the air, wings pulling the gale with it. Cracks opened in its wake. Shapes writhed and tumbled from the wounds, their arms and bodies slick with gore. A thunderhead spread across the sky, its sides flashing with red lightning.

Argonis found that he was stepping forwards, that his hands were twitching on his bolter. He wanted to run after the winged creature, wanted to see the slaughter to come. He wanted to… He would…

‘Come, Argonis,’ said Horus. ‘It is done. We must be gone from here.’ And the Warmaster walked to his Stormbird as the first drops of red rain began to fall on the fires of Accazzar-Beta. ‘Order all our forces back to the fleet. There is nothing left here for those who would live.’

Myrmidax Kadith watched as the storm spread across the horizon. Thunder rattled the cables against his chrome skin. Worms of static were playing across the bodies of the automata.

<All under the dominion of the Omnissiah,> transmitted Kadith. <Respond with disposition data.>

Only static and null-code answered.

<By the majesty of the machine, you will process my command.>

Above him the void shields sparked and pulsed as a black rain began to fall. In the distance the clouds were pulsing red. He could feel the links to those under his command vanishing just as the storm clouds blew closer. The world felt as though it were shrinking, its data erased. He reflected on the possibilities: an atmospheric weapon of some kind, possibly combined with a rare variety of data-phage.

The bolt of lightning struck the void shield above. The world flashed white as a layer of energy collapsed. The storm was on them now, racing across the sky to swallow the daylight. He and his cohorts were alone in the gloom.

Another lightning bolt struck the void shields, and then another, and another, like a hammer striking down from the sky. The domes of energy shattered.

Kadith braced for weapons fire, for the scream of gunships and the coming of the Warmaster.

The rain continued to fall. The carapaces of the automata chimed as the drops struck. Kadith looked at the liquid running off them, and across the ground. It was not black as he had first thought. It was red. Thick, wet, red.

The figures came from the storm front in a rush. Kadith had seconds to catch sight of teeth and stretched bodies of flayed muscle as the howling tide broke.

‘Kill protocol!’ shouted Kadith in his false true voice.

The automata and myrmidons fired. Bodies exploded into clouds of red slime. Plasma turned hides of brass into molten spray. Beams of light sliced through packs of skinless hounds. Kadith’s senses were filled with static and distortion.

But the horde kept coming. Red liquid coated the ground and every figure. The world was crimson and burning. To his right, a creature with spider legs and a torso of brass and muscle shrieked, and charged towards a siege automaton. Flesh and machine met. Pistons rammed forwards. Claws of bone shattered armour plates. Corrupted data battered across Kadith’s senses. Half his mind was trying to correlate the patterns of battle, trying to coordinate movement and fire.

A figure plunged from the storm clouds. Fire roared from its mouth, and smoke spilled from its wings. It landed before Kadith, the ground shattering beneath its hooves. It whirled as it rose, wings and axe and jaws scything through Kadith's guard.

Rounds rang off the creature's hide. Kadith took a step backwards, stabilised his frame and aimed his weapons. The power built in the charge chambers as the creature loomed above him, blood and flame scattering from it as it took a slow step towards him. The charge in his weapons reached maximum. His vision was a fog of static, but somehow he could still see the creature, as though he were not seeing it with his eyes. Its jaws lolled open. A dog's smile of teeth and hunger.

Kadith fired, and the creature leapt forwards, its wings a canopy spread against the storm, its axe a red edge cutting down.

Storms swallowed the sphere of Accazzar-Beta. Argonis watched them spread across the planet as it turned beneath the *Vengeful Spirit*. It had been only an hour since the Warmaster had returned from the planet's surface, and in that time the planet had changed.

Red streaks ran through the clouds, growing brighter and broader. Vast webs of lightning branched across the storms, running on and on and then suddenly fading. The light lingered in Argonis' eyes, and he thought that he heard a shriek of thunder even though kilometres of vacuum separated him from the storms.

'Beautiful, is it not?' said Horus. 'At least, after a fashion.'

Horus stepped up to the viewport. Argonis felt his skin prickle. He did not want to look up from the dying world before him, though. He did not want to look at the Warmaster.

'You asked a question when this began, my son,' said Horus. 'Do you still wish an answer?'

'Why are you doing this?'

'Because I can. Because I must.'

'And what do you wish me to do with that knowledge, my lord?'

Horus turned from the viewport as lightning clawed the surface of the red clouds.

'I wish you to carry its truth with you.'

The Court of the Governor of the Gilded Worlds

'And now, Desigus, Lord of the Gilded Worlds, and Warden of the Aventian Gulf, you have heard my words, and must now choose what fate you wish

for the world you guard.’

Desigus stares at Argonis, his already pale face leeched of colour.

‘It… it is not possible… It cannot be…’

‘I am not here to convince you,’ says Argonis, with the smallest of shrugs. ‘I am here only to ask if you comply with the will of the Warmaster.’ He pauses, then asks the question he bears like a drawn sword. ‘What is your answer?’

The Warmaster, Horus, on the bridge of the Vengeful Spirit

DUTY WAITS

Guy Haley

The Anterior Wall, Gate Anterior Six. Dorn’s fortress is new on Terra’s aged terms, but already the acids of the air and rain have eaten into it, pocking it rough as wave-worn rock. The erosion is getting worse. The processes the Emperor set in motion to clean the toxins from the air have halted. After a period of hopeful remission, Terra’s long illness has returned. Sacrificed to the exigencies of war, the regeneration of mankind’s home world has halted.

A column of warriors in yellow armour march upon the wall. The Imperial Fists are on patrol. There are five hundred of them, a company, with all their attendant officers. At their head is their captain, Maximus Thane.

Cold Himalazian winds cut across a wall-walk large enough for a squadron of tanks to ride down five abreast. In the upper reaches, where the Palace has smothered Earth’s highest peaks, it is snowing dirty flakes flecked with the smuts of industry. On the lower ramparts there is only rain. Once, these lands were dry, high plateaus; now they are a Palace larger than a city. Emissions from its lofty towers create their own storms. Atmospheric regulators spew steam into the sky. Artificial clouds rapidly become rain in the chill, thin air. None of it blesses the torrid earth. The rain runs into drains and thence into funnels that take it down into the spaces between the Palace’s cellars and the hidden bedrock. All the water is sucked back up by the Palace, to be used again and again.

Between the dark clouds, the sky is a sickly vanilla shade. It is a bruise gone past its worst lividity. Ordinarily the armour of the giants stamping along the wall is a rich gold, far cleaner than the ailing skies, a yellow as bright as Terra’s extinct wildflowers. The quality of the sun desaturates the hue of their armour until it is a leper’s pallor. When the clouds scud over the sun, it becomes a murky green.

The wind carries the rain in steeply. In eddies created by angles in the wall, it turns in soaking gyres. The water runs over the armour, gathering in corners, streaking eye-lenses, pouring over their emblems of a black fist upon a white field. Both seem grey in the rain.

The Imperial Fists march relentlessly. Their armour is impervious to energy blast, explosion and the void. Mere weather is of no concern to the Legiones Astartes. They must move fast, for they have a lot of ground to cover.

The Anterior Wall is a loop, a rope of stone, rockcrete, plasteel and adamantium, tossed out to snare a great swathe of territory and steal it into the Palace's embrace. It forms a bailey, though one built to the scale of titans rather than men. Behind the Anterior Wall, the Lion's Gate let into the Eternity Wall. Whereas the Anterior Wall is only stupendous in scale, the Lion's Gate defies human senses. There are mountains smaller than the gatehouse. Though more than three hundred kilometres from the Anterior Wall, it is clearly visible. Even through the rain, it is a squat, brooding shadow.

The Lion's Gate is not these Space Marines' concern. Others of their Legion man its guns and its parapets. Their duty is on the Anterior Wall, and true to the nature of their kind, they give it their complete attention – rain, dirt and all. No place in the Palace is safe. The enemy could come at any time. The enemy have already attacked. Since the Alpha Legion's assault on Terra, the praetorians of the Emperor have been vigilant.

There are six gates that pierce the wall's frontage. They are each one hundred and forty-three kilometres apart. The wall itself is nine hundred and fifty kilometres long, though if one were to draw a straight line between the two points where it joins the Eternity Wall, the distance would be only three hundred and ninety-six kilometres.

The Space Marines doggedly tramp along. Their pace does not vary, but remains a jog that an unmodified human could not possibly match. They do it for hours, for kilometre after kilometre, thundering past the unblinking eyes of picters, through the spread nets of motion sensors, their patrol logged by every one. To their left the outer ward of the Palace spreads itself across the ground. The buildings there are strategically unimportant, else they would be within the Eternity Wall. Civilian abodes. Offices for non-hegemony organisations. Corporate interests, trade cartel headquarters, charitable foundations, places of education. All the usual trappings of human society. But most of the concerns sheltering in the Anterior loop have either been shut down or subordinated to the growing Imperial bureaucracy. There has never been a state of war like this in all of mankind's history. Freedom is ever the first casualty of war, and it has been lost notably quickly this time.

The company approaches a bastion athwart the walk, where a lesser wall projects inwards for a dozen kilometres, concealing what lies beyond. A roaring of engines and the lights of void ships climbing skywards indicates

where they are. The Imperial Fists slow and come to a halt in perfect formation. The rain drums off their armour. Yellow armour in yellow gloom.

Their leader marches to the gate let into the tower. It is thirty metres high and fifteen wide. Automated guns track him as he approaches the sentry post set into the plascrete next to the gate. The post is a cylinder as tall as a mortal human. The cylinder swivels on soundless bearings, opening itself to reveal a half-man meshed with electronics housed inside. The rain spatters his pallid skin.

The captain addresses the servitor.

‘Thane, Maximus. Twenty-Second Captain, Imperial Fists Twenty-Second Company, Second Chapter. Personal ident VII-22-Alpha-Alpha-7709231.’

The Imperial Fists are forced to do this every time they pass a bastion. Treachery brings fear of more treachery. Infiltrators have already breached the Palace once. Lord Rogal Dorn will not have it happen again. Every warrior must present his credentials, no matter his rank. ‘Watchword for today is *Europa*.’

‘Ident accepted. Watchword accepted,’ says the half-man. His lips are sutured shut, and the mechanisms of speech have been excised from his throat. The voice is mechanical, and issues from a panel over his head. A broad-spread, low-power laser fans out from a lens over the door, measuring every aspect of Thane’s armour. Simultaneously, cogitators within the building link with Thane’s suit and interrogate it independently, reviewing pict data and demanding passwords of their own that only the battleplate’s machine-spirit knows. Above, on the wall, are more warriors of the VII Legion. They are from another company, and ordered to shoot anyone on sight that appears suspicious. Thane knows they will kill him if he so much as hesitates in delivering the passcodes.

‘Remove your helm,’ says the half-man.

Thane complies. Air pressure equalises with a hiss. Cold rain runs down his face. His left eye is momentarily dazzled by a retinal scan. A needle tastes the blood of his cheek.

‘Maximus Thane identification completed. You may pass, captain,’ says the voice.

The lights on an access panel beside the servitor cycle as it contacts devices buried under kilometres of stone. It chimes. Locking teeth clunk into their housings. The gate slides back, revealing a two-and-a-half-metre thickness of metal on toothed tracks, slick with grease that is soon beaded

with the rain. Like the wall, the gate is barely a few years old, but already it is pitted. Thane passes through. The first of his officers advances to the servitor and repeats the process. Each of them has their own watchword.

A tunnel passes through the bastion. Guns track Thane every step of the way. At the far end is a second gate, where he undergoes a duplicate of the password process. The far gate opens, then closes behind him. Getting his men through will take an hour. There are dozens more towers like this they must negotiate. Every patrol has to undergo the same. The wall is never empty for longer than fifteen minutes. Thousands of checks are made every hour. It has to be this way. The Alpha Legion showed them that.

Thane takes a moment for himself and goes to the wall's inner edge. Both sides of the wall-walk have a crenellated parapet. Risky, in a fortress, for a covered rear facing allows an enemy that captures the wall to turn it to his own protection, but there is a good reason for it.

Much of the Anterior loop is occupied by the Lion's Gate Spaceport. The artificial plains of its landing fields stretch from the Anterior Wall to the Eternity Wall, filling the space entirely. Thane ponders the monumental efforts required to build the port. A subsidiary Himalazian mountain range was levelled to accommodate it. It is perfectly flat and currently occupied by hundreds of enormous landers. Ground vehicles speed along its road grid, lights blinking. Ships take off and land in constant cycle. The wall shakes as one lifts off near Thane's position, burning oceans of fuel to haul its bulk out of Terra's gravity well.

He watches its slow progress to orbit. His eyes are drawn to the heavens, which heave with the false stars of spacecraft and high-anchor orbitals.

Where will Horus strike first, he thinks, *when he finally comes into the system? Will he stop at Mars to tip the civil war there in his favour? Will they fall upon Luna, to neutralise the defence stations? Will they make a direct attack?*

The situation appears hopeless. Those loyal to the Emperor are outnumbered and scattered. It does not matter that Lord Dorn has been joined by his brothers Leman Russ, Jaghatai Khan and lately Sanguinius upon Terra. It appears a mighty force, but all their Legions have been mauled. Dorn's other loyal siblings are scattered across the galaxy. A little hope has filtered down into the populace at the four's gathering, at the abatement of the warp storm and the arrival of reinforcements from across the Imperium. Thane does not share it. He has a fine strategic mind. The

odds are stacked against Terra. He believes something terrible, though he does not want to, and tries hard to change his opinion. But he cannot. He believes that Horus will win.

Time ticks on. Terra has been waiting for years for the attack. The fortress has been ready for months, the battlefield is set.

Still the enemy does not come.

Nearly two thousand kilometres away, in a tower facing towards sunset, another of Dorn’s sons performs his repetitive labours. It would take a month of ceaseless marching to get to this other place from Thane’s position, but unbelievably the fortifications are the same. The wall is part of the same defence system. The road atop it is the same road. A man could walk between the two places uninterrupted, save for Lord Dorn’s multiple layers of security.

The name of this second Imperial Fist is Kolo. Only Kolo; if he once had another name, he does not remember it. The Legion recruiters did not mark one down. Like many of his kind he recalls little of his origins, though sometimes he has flashes of hot nights and hotter days. The burnt-sugar shade of his skin and his accent marks him out as a native of Mid-Afrik. The rest of his past has been wiped away by the Emperor’s gifts. He is Terran, he knows that, one of many recruited when the warp storm made transit to Inwit impossible. It is only two years since his admittance to the Legion, but he has already forgotten who he was.

The wall is called the Dusk Wall. Kolo is deep inside it, ninety metres beneath the surface, under layered plascrete, ferrocrete and rockcrete. The walls are riddled with cysts of reactive liquid plasteks and braided cables of adamantium wire. Kolo is within a gallery lit by orange screen glow. The cathode screens in the gallery are deliberately primitive electronics that are easy to produce and resistant to enemy subversion. The great sciences of the Imperium have been bypassed in favour of robust simplicity. This change in attitude, though expedient, will cost mankind in the years to come.

Kolo was raised in the hope of defeating mankind’s extra-terrestrial foes, but his dreams of fighting for a greater future remain unrealised. Kolo has never left Terra. In the stead of alien nightmares, he faces the horror of fighting those he should have named brother.

‘Anything?’ Kolo asks. For the baseline humans he commands, his moods are difficult to read. His features are blocky on a square face not designed to

convey emotion. Even so, his hopefulness is apparent. It has been a long wait. He wishes to fight.

‘Nothing, my lord Imperial Fist,’ says the individual manning the station. The flickering lines of ray-painted light on the glass remain devoid of content. There is a sole block of text at the top containing the operator’s details. There are no messages beneath that, no picts of invading fleets, no radar or augur returns. The orange-and-black screen is void of data as the sky is void of foes. There is only a blinking cursor beneath the man’s digitised identity. Nothing else.

‘Inform me as soon as you have anything,’ Kolo says, words he has said a thousand times in the last two months. He moves on down the rows of operatives.

Kolo is a line trooper, the lowest rank of legionary. Yet the Praetorian’s sons are so thinly spread across the fortress-Palace, many have duties that exceed their rank. His task, for the moment, is to act as a link between the fortress’ eyes and its armaments.

One day, Kolo will bear the name Bulwark for his actions in the siege. He will earn it for the acts he will perform upon the wall in the months to come. He will be dauntless, implacable. That day is far ahead of him. And though he will be reckoned a hero, he will find no glory in the name’s earning. He will yearn for the boredom of the instrument gallery before the end.

He stops again by another operative.

‘Anything from the outer system?’

‘Nothing, my lord,’ says the man. ‘I will inform you as soon as we see anything,’ he adds quickly, pre-empting Kolo’s ritual command.

Caught on the verge of saying it, Kolo instead nods, and continues with his endless pacing up and down the gallery, like a beast in a cage driven mad by confinement.

Six days later, Thane’s company is on guard rotation over the Katman Road. They line the walls of the artificial canyon the road runs down. Hundreds of Space Marines in golden yellow stand as still as statues. Maximus Thane has forbidden his men to move. Attention to detail and discipline are the Imperial Fists’ defining characteristics, and they obey. Thane wishes his company to present the appearance of an indomitable wall of ceramite-clad flesh, because that is what his primarch expects. The Space Marines of the loyal Legions will be the Palace’s true defence against the traitors, no matter how high Lord Dorn piles his fortifications.

Only the parchments bearing the Imperial Fists' oaths of moment stir in the breeze. The moment was long ago. The moment has stretched, become weeks, months, years. The ink of the neat, Inwitian script declaring intentions to fight to the death has faded from black to russet. Many of the scrips are tattered. Some of Thane's men have begun to replace them. The words on the parchments are not the only things to have lost their vibrancy. The canyon is of lustrous black stone. It appears grey under sickly skies. It is as if colour has been leached from the landscape.

The civilians feel it. They rarely pause to look at the wonders around them. In the early days of Thane's vigil, they would congregate to talk around the monumental statuary lining the way. In their rest periods they would take refreshments in the restaurants and taverns that occupied the arcades at the feet of the canyon wall. They would point out the sentinels in yellow and be comforted by their presence. Not anymore. Food is administered centrally. The places of entertainment have closed. The clothes of the civilians are worn and hang off frames made spare by rationing. The civilians' walks have lost their briskness. They shuffle where once they strode.

Thane looks down on them from a soaring bridge of stone. They move slowly from their hab-blocks. They have a walk of almost a kilometre from the outer edges of the Demesne of Recorders to their work units. The flow of the crowd never stops. It is divided into two by a line of dirty red rope strung from tarnished poles. On the left, fresh shifts walk towards their employment. The rightward lines are returning home. The honk of the shift-horns blare with merciless regularity, chopping Thane's watch into four-hour blocks.

Thane supposes the civilians are luckier than some in the Palace, for they at least have the variety of workplace and home. For many others who labour in the Emperor's fortress, the two have become one and the same. When Thane came to the Palace, the civilians were freer; they came and went from Palace and planet. The war grinds down their freedoms. Travel is difficult, secured only by permission chits that must be validated by multiple authorities. The likes of the Recorders remain trapped where they were employed when the war broke out. The rebellion on Mars, the early battles in the outer system and Alpharius' incursion – each event has chipped away another facet from their lives, until only service remains.

The Recorders are part of the machinery of government. During the Great Crusade they logged the growing possessions of the Imperium, parsing data into forms useful to the colonial authorities. Despite their name, the Recorders are assessors, of a sort. Thane does not know what they are assessing now, or if the information they process is useful any longer.

Thane wonders if things will ever return to normal.

The reports that crackle periodically in Thane's ear sound at exactly the same times, every single day. They report the same information. In the main they are sign-offs from his squad sergeants, announcing incoming data bursts conveying the physical status of his warriors and their wargear. All of them are hale. If he were to examine the data more thoroughly, and bring up rune displays for each one, then the outline diagrams of their war suits would show green. Their ammo counts would read at full. Their biological signifiers would all be within normal parameters. There have been no problems in his company with implant degradation or rejection, and all their equipment functions at peak efficiency. Garrison duty gives his Apothecaries and the Techmarines plenty of time to minister to their charges.

There is no guard rail or parapet to line the edge of the Katman road, and the drop from the edge would probably kill Thane if he fell. The distant ground is hard rockcrete paved with marble. As he scans the crowds, Thane thinks about the drop.

If he took one step, he would plummet for exactly twelve point three seconds. He knows this because he has calculated it several times. At impact, the ceramite of his armour would crack open. The plasteel framing beneath the outer plates would buckle. Kinetic energy transferred to his body an instant later would rupture his internal organs. His fused ribs would burst. In all probability, only the soft bodyglove worn under his battleplate would retain its integrity. Nevertheless, he is a Space Marine. He might live. His armour and enhanced body would afford him a one-in-four chance of survival, if an Apothecary were to reach him quickly. Any unfortunate person he landed upon would surely die, though if he were to hit one of the civilians below, his own chance of survival would go up to around forty per cent.

In his head, Thane calculates differing outcomes under differing circumstances. If he were to twist, or fling out his arms, or abandon his weapon, or fire his suit stabilisation jets on full burn at the last moment, or in brief bursts, or all the way down, or what would happen were he

unarmoured. When he has exhausted all the variant scenarios he deems likely, he uses the idle processing power of his battleplate's cogitator to check his results.

He is never wrong. It would surprise him if the cogitator gave him a different answer. His Legion's talents are in planning, and the complete command of probability. Such calculations are second nature. But an Imperial Fist never takes anything for granted; they deal in certainty, and certainty only comes by exploring every single variable. That is their way – Dorn's way.

Of course there is one flaw to this mathematical exercise. Thane is never going to step off the precipice. It is an impossible situation. His calculations are pointless, done for the sake of doing.

He considers that he might be bored.

Thane allows himself to abandon the discipline of stillness and moves his head, inclining it a few degrees skywards. He has been looking at the sky more and more often in recent days. Not one of the civilians passing below would notice the motion even if they were looking up at him, which none of them are. Space Marines are far more observant. His lieutenant sees, though he too is staring down at the civilians passing below.

The vox clicks.

'Captain Thane, is something wrong?'

His lieutenant is named Guntren. In seven months' time, he will be dead.

Thane does not answer. The sky is strangely empty. The vast orbital plates have been torn down, or converted into fortresses and moved away from the planet. The Skye plate, now festooned with giant cannons, is the sole platform of any significance that remains visible from his position. Before there were many. Without them the heavens look naked and sad.

Held aloft by the labouring of thousands of giant gravitic motors, Skye hangs in geosynchronous orbit to the west of the Palace, where the watery sun is making its way towards the horizon. Thin cloud obscures Skye's details, but its presence remains obvious from the huge shadow it casts on the mountains. High above, the artificial stars of more distant satellites and the fleets of the Emperor make firefly swarms in the void. Thane watches them wordlessly.

That Thane has disobeyed his own order concerns the lieutenant.

'Thane?' Guntren repeats.

'Why do they not attack?' asks Thane. 'How much longer must we wait?'

Guntren has no answer. The sky has no answer.

The enemy do not come.

Days bleed into weeks. Life is duty. Thane lives to fight, but garrison duty is a monotony of patrolling, analysis, weapons drill, planning and replanning. This is not living for the Imperial Fists, it is existence of the most tense and tedious kind. Thane is weary for lack of action. Kolo is tired of looking at screens.

One day, it changes, but only for the worse, and it is not the day the enemy comes.

Thane's duty has taken him to the Lion's Gate, where he is on a rota to command from its strategic centre for twenty-eight days. His warriors man the guns and patrol its walls. To the naked eye nothing seems different. The void ships continue their thundering. The civilians their toils, the defenders their vigilance. Even so, things are not the same. There is a thrill to the air, the queasy foreboding of danger.

There has been much activity in orbit. Ships are leaving Terra's anchorages in number. Dorn has called a Great Muster at Beta-Garmon. Some of Thane's brothers are bound there, to join the greatest assemblage of Imperial arms since the war with Horus began. Thane is not. His company is among many ordered to remain at the Palace. He hides his disappointment poorly, and he is short with his men.

Upon the Throneworld, tension grows.

Kolo is no longer staring at screens. To his immense relief, his new assignment has him out of doors. He has returned to his squad and they are patrolling the Lion's Market; his company are spread wide across the district. The market was the commercial heart of the Lion's Quarter, but it is not the gaudy place it once was. Most of its stalls have been cleared. In their place are stacks of ammunition containers salvaged from Mars. Some of the stacks are almost as tall as walls, though nothing can match the height of the Lion's Gate. The containers are empty, their contents removed far underground to hardened magazines. The remaining market stalls are small and sad in their shadow, and without exception their scuffed surfaces are bare. No one trades here anymore. It is not permitted. The shops around the periphery of the square are mostly shuttered, their keepers drafted to more pressing labours. The few that are open have little to sell.

The Imperial Fists sweep the square in twos. It is an open show of force. Reassure the civilians, seek out malcontents and potential traitors. That is the

idea. Those are their orders. But in the faces of the few people abroad Kolo sees no reassurance. All he sees is fear.

‘We are frightening them,’ Kolo says aloud.

‘Keep your mind on your duty, brother,’ his sergeant, Benedict, voxes back, but he is troubled too.

A gaunt man shivers as Kolo checks his papers. It is cold, and the man’s once fine clothes are inadequate for the climate of the Himalazian massif.

‘You should not be out here,’ Kolo tells him.

‘Where can I go?’ says the man miserably.

‘You should not be out here,’ Kolo repeats. ‘You do not have clearance.’

The man’s situation is not unusual. There are many people trapped in the Palace by the war. Most are travellers who cannot return to their proper place in the Imperium. Many of them have no legal residence. Lords from the Imperium’s far-flung dominions sleep rough alongside dispossessed workers, all finding themselves victim to bureaucracy’s mercilessness. The population of the Palace is in the millions. Keeping track of who should and should not be there is a never-ending task.

‘Never mind,’ says Kolo. He presses the tattered identity papers back into the man’s hands. ‘Find somewhere. Stay off the streets.’

The man bobs his head in fearful gratitude, and hurries away.

‘You shouldn’t let them go,’ growls Kolo’s brother, Berthan. He is a veteran, and from Inwit. He has yet to fully accept Kolo into the squad. ‘All unregistered persons are a risk.’

‘His papers were in order,’ says Kolo. ‘As much as can be. We have to show some mercy.’

‘If he were an infiltrator, his papers would also be in order,’ says Berthan, watching the man depart. ‘Mercy is dangerous.’

‘You think we should kill them all, just to be safe?’ says Kolo harshly.

‘No,’ says Berthan. He lets the man go. He could stop him, but he doesn’t.

Kolo wonders how long Berthan will reply that way, if the same question is asked again. It will be. It is inevitable. He can see Berthan killing the man in his imagination. He can see himself doing the same.

‘Squad,’ Sergeant Benedict voxes. ’Move out, now, to the Westway. There’s trouble.’

‘What kind?’ asked Berthan. He is eager for action. Anything to dispel the awfulness of waiting.

‘The civilian kind,’ says the sergeant. His voice is tense.

Civilian trouble is the worst kind of trouble for a warrior to deal with.

Maximus Thane watches a pict-feed of the brewing riot. A servo-skull swoops dizzyingly over a crowd of people. There are a few dozen enforcers in a line, far too few to hold back so many, and they are nearly as underfed and anxious as the crowd they oppose. The crowd had been in lines, waiting patiently to collect their rations in the Lion's Market from the western entrance, where some of the empty cargo containers have been repurposed into a distribution centre. Doors have been cut into the sides, with counters to allow the allocation of food held within. But today the shutters didn't open. They remain closed. That is the problem.

The queues began to form at dawn. They reached a kilometre and a half in length before it became evident the doors were not going to open. Soon after, the lines began to fragment. The people that made up the lines are pressing forwards. A mob is forming. This would necessarily be a cause for concern. A quick thinker might have soothed their fears with words. But there does not appear to be one such among the enforcers, and there is a hard kernel to the crowd. A man is shouting something Thane cannot hear, but which is clearly inflammatory. People are listening. As a snowflake gathers around a fleck of dust, so danger accretes around this man.

'Why don't they arrest him?' growls Thane. He was not made for police work, only war, but his mind is adaptable and expansive, and the solution to this brewing problem is obvious to him.

'There are too few of them,' says Guntren.

Thane's crag of a brow narrows in on itself. 'Have they sent out a call for aid?'

Guntren is quick in retrieving the relevant information. 'No, my lord.'

'Do we have a squad in the vicinity?'

'There is a battle squad of twenty, sweeping the market. They are of Hanfeld's company.'

'Find me the relevant link codes and put me through to them,' says Thane.

'They have not called for aid. We should leave this to the enforcers,' warns Guntren.

'Noted,' said Thane. 'Do it anyway.'

Kolo's finger tightens on the trigger. He and his brothers face down the angry mob. There are thousands of them, and more are coming every minute. Fifty enforcers attempt to keep the peace. It is hopeless. The Space Marines have not helped the situation. When Kolo's squad arrived, the

crowd calmed a moment, but then its fury leapt back up, like a wildfire creeping across damp ground suddenly encountering dry grass. They are angry to see the Imperial Fists.

‘Stand down. Return to your quarters. There will be food tomorrow,’ says Sergeant Benedict. He sounds calm, reasonable, but the mob hears his words as provocative.

There is a man at the heart of the trouble, standing upon a stall. Around him surge the crowd. Kolo has his helm zoom in on his face. There is light in his eyes Kolo does not like. Has desperation made him eloquent, or is there something more sinister at work?

‘There is no food!’ says the man. He waves his finger around, accusing everyone and everything of something undefined but monstrous. ‘There will be no more food! The warriors of Terra depart and leave us to our fate!’

He gestures to the sky wildly, the crowd lets out a loud, animal moan.

‘They go to do the work of the Emperor,’ said Benedict. ‘They go to win the war. Patience. There will be food tomorrow. Return to your quarters.’

‘Then why do the wolves of Leman Russ not obey? Why does the Emperor leave Terra? Why is this so? Has our sacrifice not been great enough?’

Both of these rumours have been gathering currency in the last few days. The first rumour is true. The Space Wolves have departed at odds with Kolo’s own primarch. They have refused to join the Great Muster. The second rumour is not. The Emperor remains on Terra, though only Dorn and the Imperial Regent know where. No one else has seen Him. The people are losing faith.

The demagogue is furious beyond reason. The crowd are less fanatical, but they are scared, and their individuality is being subsumed into the volatile groupthink of the mob. Their minds melt together, like discrete cubes of ice in a bucket turning to indivisible water.

Space Marines are not made to suppress riots. They are not made to arrest people and calm situations. Kolo can see what is about to happen. The energy of violence is on the air, as electric as in any battle. More and more people are joining the crowd. He reflects that this is the first time he has aimed his weapon at another living being. He hates that this is so.

‘Return to your quarters!’ shouts Benedict. His voxmitter booms loudly. His harsh, grating voice should have had the crowd running. It has the opposite effect.

The first stone rings off Kolo’s helmet with the sound of a muffled bell. A gun goes off in the enforcers’ line. There is a scream. The crowd’s mood switches instantly, from hostile to murderous. They make more inchoate noises, speaking with one, mindless voice. Debris rains down on the Space Marines from all sides: metal poles from the abandoned stores, empty ration packs, cans, ordure, dead vermin. The Imperial Fists stand stock-still, guns braced in firing positions. Waiting.

‘You claim to protect us!’ shrieks the demagogue. Now his voice is almost lost under the bellowing of the crowd. It is the last shred of reason in a mind turning insane. ‘You oppress us! You are all the same, so-called sons of the Emperor! You will be the doom of us all!’

The crowd attack in earnest. The fear transhumans engender in individuals has no hold on the gestalt entity of the mob. They are of a single thought now, a seething, multi-limbed creature driven by hunger, inured to fear. Feeble fists beat against Kolo’s armour. The cargo containers of the distribution centre rock as hundreds of men attempt to upset them. The enforcers are dragged down.

‘End this now,’ says a voice. It comes in over Chapter-level vox. It carries a captain’s signum. Captain Thane. Kolo knows him only by name, but he is duty bound to obey him.

Benedict switches from voxmitter to suit-to-suit vox. He says one word.

‘Fire.’

The Imperial Fists do not hesitate. Their fingers squeeze triggers. The crackle of rocket ignition sounds from every gun, followed by the raucous, belching explosions of bolt-rounds.

The effect of a bolt-round on unarmoured bodies is ugly. The rioters go from contained packages of life, neatly wrapped in clothes and skin, to a red mess. The demagogue dies with his anger frothing from his lips. The people at the edges of the crowd come to their senses and flee. Those at the centre are too far gone to relent immediately, but by the time Kolo’s fourth round takes a life, they are running. All of them are running. The resulting stampede kills hundreds, crushing bodies underfoot, or squeezing the breath out of them against the unyielding walls of the container stacks as they push to squeeze through narrow gaps. They scream as they run blindly into one another, knocking each other down, bouncing off obstacles. They turn on each other in their desperation to get away. The young and the old fare the worst.

The Imperial Fists fire only as many times as strictly necessary. Four shots apiece.

‘Cease firing,’ said Benedict emotionlessly.

Thane stares grimly at the pict units. Drones sweep over the square, providing him multiple angles to examine the Legion’s handiwork.

The dead litter an area one hundred and eighty metres across by forty-five deep. The centre is an abattoir scene where not one body remains intact. At the edges the bodies are whole, asphyxiated mostly, lying down like they are playing a childish game. They are in the same orientation, heads away from the massacre. They are like the petals of a flower around a red corolla, or iron filings displaying the delicate lines of force around a magnet. He estimates over a thousand dead. The action, stampede and aftermath lasted less than six minutes.

The Imperial Fists have returned to the statue stillness. Their guns are smoking. Blood drips from yellow battleplate. The paving before the distribution centre is awash with gore. It gathers thickly in the messages of peace and hope engraved into the flagstones. Fyceline wisps drift over the slaughter, merging with the steam rising from opened bodies. The screams of the crowd recede as they run, terrified, from their protectors.

‘What are we doing?’ says Guntren.

‘Keeping the peace before the fight,’ says Thane.

‘Was it truly necessary?’ says Guntren.

‘Yes,’ says Thane. He turns away from the screens. ‘Find me the official responsible for this travesty,’ he orders his company vox-master. ‘If there is no food for the civilians,’ he says to his logister, ‘see what the Legion can spare. I want contingencies formulating to prevent this happening again.’

Guntren gives him an angry stare. ‘Blood cannot be soaked up by bread,’ he says.

Thane does not reply.

It is quiet in the square now.

And still the enemy do not come.

MAGISTERIUM

Chris Wraigh

Samonas had survived.

The bald fact meant almost nothing to him. Preservation of his own life, for its own sake, had never been something he had cared about. The very idea was a kind of blasphemy – one of the few he still believed in.

By the same token, he was not self-indulgent enough to wish that he had perished alongside his brothers of the Ten Thousand. That would have been an equal, if an opposite, error, for grief was as alien an emotion to him as pride. And yet, the event itself, the catastrophe, could not be ignored. It hung like an iron chain around the shoulders of all those who had come back. Physical wounds could heal, and most would do so quickly, but this weight was not a physical thing. None spoke the word ‘failure’, but still it could be half heard in the echoing silences of the Tower of Hegemon, detected in every whisper of faded crimson fabric on cold stone, seen in every deflected look.

Samonas walked down the long gallery. The suspensor lumens in the tower were turned down. That reflected the mood – the innards of the place were almost empty now, and already growing musty from stagnant air.

Nine out of every ten. *Nine out of every ten.* At first he had not believed it, even after witnessing the scale of the slaughter at close quarters. No one had. Only once the portal was truly sealed and the foundations of the Palace secured, only once the last ragged lines of survivors had limped back to the arming chambers, their cloaks rent and their blades broken, did it start to seem possible.

Those who had gained the gate waited for many days in the tower afterwards, hoping more would somehow follow them out, but the deep paths had been closed by the Emperor Himself and could not be opened again. Any souls that had been sent into that impossible realm to contest the approach of Unreality and had not yet returned were lost there.

Nine out of every ten. The loss was barely conceivable. Every Custodian was a unique and priceless creation, a masterpiece of genecraft curated over many decades, sometimes centuries. Before the current conflict had come, the numbers lost in combat had never risen above a handful in any single engagement. A belief in their near invincibility had taken root, both within and outside the order. Strength begat strength – the Legio Custodes did not shy away from its reputation, but instead cultivated the most ostentatious

displays of dominance. Their armour became more ornate, decorated in exponentially more complex designs and insignias. Confidence, bordering – some said – on arrogance, had never been in short supply.

Samonas drew closer to a pair of large doors. He did not know how his master would be. For the first time in the many long years since he had begun to serve him, Samonas found him hard to predict. It had been a sobering discovery, realising that even he was subject to the cold hand of doubt, to the slow poison of uncertainty – beforehand, that had not been obvious.

But there was no time for hesitation. All knew that the Warmaster was approaching now, cleaving an accelerating path towards the world of his birth. What was left was left; those who could still stand and hold a sword were required to find the strength to do so again.

At his approach, a gold-masked tower guardian opened the doors, and twin brass plates swung inwards across a bare stone floor.

Twenty figures stood in the chamber on the far side. Fourteen were baseline human counsellors and adjutants of the tower, variously armoured and cloaked in fabrics of antiquity. Five were, like Samonas, members of the order proper – Custodians of the Legion, calm giants of destruction, their helms removed to expose wound-puckered faces. Among them was Diocletian, who would surely be announced tribune soon, one of the last to withdraw from the great subterranean defeat. That one carried many injuries, some of them physical.

The twentieth, Constantin Valdor, Samonas' master, towered over them all. His head was unhelmed, exposing a slim, dour face. His scalp was shaved to the skin, marked by a filigree of scars. Little trace of age lingered on his features, even though he had lived for a very long time. When he spoke, his voice was hard-edged but held low. Even for one of the Legio, even when set against the peerless adepts of that place, the command exercised over his body was astonishing and worthy of study – he would resemble a graven image one moment, utterly still, every facial muscle held in perfect stasis, before action demanded a response, and then the liquidity of movement was so abrupt as to scrape against the limits of physical law.

But even his fine armour was damaged. The many carved eyes and sigils and signs were scratched out, as if by a cat's claws. In places, the gold of his battleplate was burned black-orange. His cloak was tattered, long strips of frayed fabric hanging from battered shoulders.

‘Can nothing be done?’ Valdor asked.

One of the assembled officials, a green-robed woman named Alei Nai-Borsch who bore the mark of the tower’s principal forge, bowed her shaved head in apology.

‘I have demanded more from the Martian delegation, who are the only ones with the power to emend this,’ she said. ‘There are limits to our prestige with them at this time. They lost a great deal, too.’

Valdor nodded. ‘How many are required?’

‘Seven, captain-general. By nightfall, dependent on the labours of the Apothecaries, perhaps eight.’

Samonas immediately understood what was being discussed. Dreadnought shells. For centuries the requirement for such things had been light, and only a handful had existed within the frigid depths of the tower’s mausoleum. Now, demand for the hallowed sarcophagi was acute. In normal times, the process of interment would have been extended for months, enough time to painstakingly prepare the purpose-built individual walker-units for the unique mind-impulse lattices of the recipient. These were not normal times, though, and assistance was urgently required.

‘I shall speak to them,’ said Valdor. ‘What did they want in return?’

‘That was the thing,’ said Nai-Borsch. ‘Nothing that I could ascertain. There was… I do not know. But I thought I detected something like… shame.’

Valdor’s expression never flickered. ‘As well there might be.’ He turned to another official, Kain Noi-Hailas, the master armourer. ‘The returned fighters who still stand,’ he said. ‘You have seven days. Every blade, every armour plate, every spear.’

Samonas guessed that the timetable was impossible. The equipment of the Legio had been mutilated at an even faster rate than its warriors. In the final hours of the subterranean defeat, many Custodians had fought empty-handed, taking on enemies beyond imagination with clenched fists and broken spear-staves. Samonas had been one of them, wielding his extinguished sentinel blade against creatures of unbound terror. By the end, the metal had been boiled away into a foul reek of smoke, leaving him only the shards at the hilt to stab with. He still remembered the eyes, glaring at him through a haze of alien spoil, like reptiles’ eyes, yellow and slitted, confident, infinitely malignant, and winning.

Noi-Hailas merely bowed. Like all of them, he had been working for weeks with only snatched hours of sleep between punishing work-details. He was not posthuman in the way that Diocletian and Samonas were, and the exertion would likely kill him if not halted soon. And it would not halt soon.

‘By your will, captain-general,’ he said.

Only then did Valdor turn to Samonas. ‘You bring me welcome news, I trust, *vestarios*.’

That was an archaic title, one that meant little other than a vague conferral of seniority. Samonas had been at the side of the captain-general for over a hundred years now, and that carried more weight than any dusty term of the Lex.

‘The Lord Dorn is ready to receive you,’ Samonas said. ‘Is that welcome or unwelcome?’

Valdor did not smile.

‘Another primarch,’ he murmured. Then his expression lifted – forcefully, perhaps. ‘Very good,’ he said to the others. ‘Continue as you have been doing. The protection of Him on the Throne be with you.’

The others bowed, then withdrew to pursue the tasks Valdor had given them.

‘What was his mood?’ Valdor asked Samonas, turning and walking with his vestarios back towards the great double doors.

‘The war takes its toll on us all,’ said Samonas evenly.

Valdor snorted. ‘Difficult, then. I shall watch my tongue.’

‘The time for watching tongues may have passed some time ago.’

‘You are an insolent servant, Samonas.’

‘We teeter on the edge of annihilation, lord,’ said Samonas, bowing in apology. ‘A breeding ground for insolence.’

The two of them passed back into the tower’s broad passageways, bored deep within ancient foundations. The captain-general’s gait was languid, almost totally silent despite his bulk.

‘This may be our last war together,’ Valdor said dryly. ‘Maintain the formalities, please.’

Those who did not know the captain-general assumed that he possessed nothing in the way of mortal humours. That was not entirely true, although it had taken Samonas years of close acquaintance to appreciate them.

‘This will not be like it was before, lord,’ Samonas said.

Valdor thought on that for a moment, never breaking stride. Ahead loomed great brass gates marked with the thunder-and-lightning emblem of the Legio.

‘Or it may very well be,’ the captain-general said. ‘All things repeat themselves. All lives are lived an endless number of times.’ He smiled thinly. ‘The trick is to welcome that. To wish to see it come again, just as it did in the past, now and for eternity.’

Samonas was used to his master’s musings on philosophy. Like all his kind, the captain-general was as much scholar as warrior, though in the years since Prospero it was said that he had taken to his books more than before.

‘Then we will be fighting into infinity,’ Samonas said as the doors opened.

‘Do not regret that,’ said Valdor, passing through them. ‘One way or another, it was always our fate.’

The glass panes blew out, scattering wildly across Tizca’s old streets in knee-deep piles. The shards were crimson now, refracting the blood of those who had won and lost the narrow ways into the central city. The skies above them roared, black like burning slicks of promethium. Red-hot winds raced down the blasted canyons of rubble, tearing at the lingering stone and throwing ash-clouds as high as the pyramids beyond. The earth underfoot vibrated, drumming as if hammered by great fists.

A colonnade smashed, punched into debris by a tank barrage, and the fragile walls beyond it tottered. Samonas ducked down. He breathed heavily, gripping the hilt of his crackling sentinel blade. Far to the left, across a boiled-dry watercourse, he could see the tiny, dark-grey outlines of Wolves running into the maw of combat on another front, ducking and swerving to avoid a hail of oncoming las-fire.

He watched them go, just for a second, admiring their bravado. There was something liberating about the Sons of Fenris in battle – a joy, a purity, a rawness. He had never expected to be impressed by them in that way, schooled as he had been in tales of their barbarism.

He could feel his heart beating hard. Armour-thralls and Auxilia troops pushed up the shattered transitway on either side, hugging the piles of crystal detritus. Two Custodians of Samonas’ sodality loped at the head of the advance, going warily as they passed under the shadows of more burned-out buildings.

He could feel the rumble of heavy armour grinding its way closer. Gunships braved the lightning-scarred skies over a background bellow of a

planet in torment. Explosions went off with clockwork regularity, some far into the distance, many driven in close, all of them rocking the skeletal remains of the great pyramids looming still on the northern horizon.

Samonas had fought many wars for the Legio, but nothing could have prepared him, or anyone else, for Prospero. This was battle conducted across every plane of sensory perception – reality itself rippling as the fury of two Legiones Astartes crashed into one another. The very air felt fractured, as if cracked by some unholy magic that made eyes burn and skin itch.

He looked down, and only then saw where he had crouched – over the body of a Thousand Sons Space Marine, half buried in the rubble underfoot, his helm cracked open to reveal a mutilated face beneath. The sorcerer was dead, his breastplate cleaved by swinging cuts of a greatblade. Despite those terrible wounds, the Space Marine looked almost poised to re-emerge from his dusty tomb to take up the fight again.

Samonas had killed many of them already. They did not die easily, those witches, and they were dangerous in turn, but their defiance was coming to an end now. The story's details might differ, but the conclusion was always the same – the Legio would be victorious, just as it had been ever since taking up arms alongside the Master of Mankind. These were not the first sorcerers to be excised from existence under the banner of Unity, and they would not be the last.

He got to his feet, joining the steady advance towards the end of the street. A Coronus grav-carrier thrummed past at close quarters, buoyed by a shimmer-haze that kicked and scattered the glass debris. A hundred Auxilia infantry brought up the rear, jogging through the glowing rubble and swinging las-sights.

Proximity markers on Samonas' false-image visual field drew closer, and he broke out into the intersection of two major thoroughfares. A long avenue of bombed-empty hab-units stretched along a straight axis, along which whole battalions of VI Legion armour were grinding north, wreathed in a fog of their own copious smoke. Muffled booms rang out from positions up ahead, a ranged bombardment of dug-in enemy lines.

The Wolves were not the only ones there. Aquilon Terminators were forging a path up the debris-strewn central reservation, shepherded by scattered prowl-units of the Sisterhood. Valdor was among them, his long cloak whipping in the ash-blown wind. More than sixty Custodians of the

Legio, plus hundreds of support troops and regular Auxilia units, were gathering for the push north.

The captain-general looked almost untouched by combat. His armour was close to pristine, giving off a reflective aura under Prospero's blackening skies. His Apollonian Spear seethed with energy, wrapping the golden shaft in a corona of false sunlight. He moved in the way he always did before battle – proud, confident, measured.

Samonas bowed as he drew close.

'Grim labour, vestarios,' Valdor said.

'Indeed, lord. Now that I see this place–'

He had been intending to say that he wished to see it utterly destroyed – he had seen sorcery of a scale and depravity he had never witnessed before – but he never got the chance.

The Land Raider juddered in close, gunmetal-grey and adorned with blood-red decorations of writhing serpents. It was the first of more than twenty such troop carriers, driven insanely fast through the rubble and kicking it up like a ship throws a bow wave.

For a moment Samonas never even saw Leman Russ. He had certain expectations of primarchs – that they marched on foot at the head of their armies, issuing orders in clear voices like his own master. He did not expect them to ride into war, hanging off the back of a personnel transport one-handed and swinging a damned sword around like a baresark.

'Constantin!' Russ cried out, throwing himself from the still-racing Land Raider and crunching heavily to the ground. His blade, the one Imperial scholars called *Balenight*, but which the Wolves themselves called *Mjalnar*, gleamed with a malignant silver-white spitefulness.

The Wolf King marched up to the captain-general, pelts swinging about him. Other warriors jumped down from skidding Land Raiders – Varagyr Terminators bearing axes and frostblades, their liberally bloodied armour hung with fur scraps and bone totems.

Valdor waited for him, flanked by his own honour guard. The Custodians were taller than their counterparts, and no doubt more accomplished in some of the finer arts of combat, but there was something in the Varagyr's latent menace, bleeding from them with every swaggered move, that chilled the blood.

'What took you so damn long?' Russ demanded, hawking up a gobbet of spittle and loosing on the ground. He went helmless, the only one of them

there who did – a statement of arrogant confidence that struck Samonas as borderline crazed. ‘We’ve been killing witches without your Sisters to blunt their fangs.’

Valdor stiffened a little. ‘It was your wish to engage first, lord,’ he said.

‘True.’ Russ laughed. There was a strange light in those bestial eyes – Samonas thought he looked half mad. ‘True! But you took your time when the order came.’

Order. No living man gave the captain-general an order, save the one who had created him. ‘Our landings are completed,’ Valdor said calmly. ‘We advance on all fronts, and the Knight Commander’s sisterhoods are now deploying throughout the city.’

Russ growled low in his throat, a sound that made Samonas’ spine tingle. ‘This will throttle them now. This will crush them. Hel’s eyes, I have learned to hate these bastards, but still *he* eludes me.’

‘Is he even on this world?’ asked Valdor doubtfully. ‘We have detected nothing.’

Russ drew up to Valdor then. He was a little shorter, much broader, his armour stained and smeared where Valdor’s was pristine. ‘Oh, yes,’ he hissed, smiling in a disconcertingly feral manner. ‘I can *smell* him now. I can smell him hunkering down in his own filth, fearful of me.’

Valdor remained unmoved. ‘Even now, I would see him taken to Terra, if it could be done. I would wish to know why.’

Russ laughed, a coarse bark that sent more spittle flying into Valdor’s faceplate. ‘You’re still clinging to that? Ha!’ He turned away, swinging his greatblade casually. ‘I’ve known since I first saw this world that we would face one another. I did not come here for prisoners, Constantin. If my father had truly wished for such, He would not have sent me.’

‘You were not sent alone, Lord Russ.’

Russ glanced back at Valdor, a sly smile on his fanged face. ‘Oh, that’s it, is it?’ He laughed again, but it was an ice-cold sound. ‘You have the power of Magisterium, and wish to cling to it.’ Russ paced back to him again. He was always moving, restless, like a tempest bound up inside the sham-form of a man. ‘Don’t try to invoke the Lex with *me*. You claim to speak for my father, but you’re not His blood, are you? Not like we are. That’s what really gets you, isn’t it? You’re His *instruments*. He’d toss you aside in an instant if He cared to. We, though. *We*. We’re *family.*’ Russ gave out a great belly laugh then, amused by the idea. ‘You’ll never understand that.’

Valdor didn’t reply for an instant, seemingly genuinely nonplussed.

‘There are so many errors there,’ he said eventually, ‘I do not even know where to start.’

But a reply never came. Fresh mortar-blasts bloomed at the end of the avenue. The Land Raiders gunned their smoggy engines, and the grav-tanks swung round to target new markers. In the far distance, where one of the many great pyramids slumped in burning ruin and the clouds deepened towards an inky vortex, the enemy was moving.

‘They stir!’ Russ roared joyously, running back to the Land Raider and leaping onto its chassis. The Wolves were crying out battle-cant, slamming their blades against their armour and slavering for action once more. ‘Try to keep up, Constantin – you’ll have to get your armour dirty sooner or later.’

And then the column powered up and thundered down the shattered avenue, followed by loping packs of Grey Hunters and whole contingents of bound Auxilia.

Samonas watched them go. The Aquilon guard remained static around them, their helm-faces magnificently blank. ‘Is he… in his right mind, lord?’ he ventured, looking up at Valdor enquiringly.

Valdor didn’t respond immediately. He watched the Wolves race into battle, whooping and hollering. It was impossible to gauge what he thought behind that ornate mask of auramite and carnelian.

‘Primarchs,’ he said finally, a single, withering expletive that sounded as close to a curse as the captain-general of the Ten Thousand would ever get.

‘You refused our offer of assistance,’ said Dorn.

‘We refused nothing,’ said Valdor. ‘You know where the order came from.’

‘And you never resisted it.’

‘Of course not.’ Valdor drew in a weary breath. ‘Resisting orders has not given spectacular results thus far, has it?’

‘Neither has following them,’ said Dorn grimly.

The tension between the two figures was evident, despite the informal setting. The primarch Rogal Dorn was unarmoured, as he preferred to be unless called to war. As ever, his aspect was spartan, clad in the robes of a warrior-monk. His white hair had grown long, adding to the effect. The many stone tables of his private chambers were stuffed with the paraphernalia of Imperial bureaucracy – order capsules, tactical reports, innumerable requests for audience or support. Even though the doors were

closed and locked, Samonas guessed that dozens of attendants still hovered on the far side, waiting for their moment to run the gauntlet of the Lord Commander's unpredictable mood.

For now, though, it was only the three of them, locked away in the windowless heart of Dorn's cell-like sanctum, raking over old regrets before the storm hit.

'There are days,' said Dorn, 'when I think nothing any of us do is free of the curse.'

'Curse? I did not have you as a suspicious soul.'

'I wasn't. We're all having to learn new things.' Dorn sat back in his heavy throne, for a moment letting the aura of control slip. He looked like some archaic warlord then, holed up in his crumbling citadel as the tides of ruin lapped closer. Samonas tried not to meet his gaze.

'The situation remains the same,' Valdor said, steering the discussion back to its purpose. 'The Emperor holds the breach under the Palace. The Mechanicum works on a way to release Him from this duty, but you and I both know that they will not succeed in the time we have left to us.'

'But it's not the *same*, though, is it?' said Dorn. 'You should have withdrawn earlier. Tell me, Constantin, what did you gain, clinging on down there for so long? You'd all rather have died following a command than countermand it.'

'I do not see–'

'It was a fool's errand!' Dorn exclaimed. 'I tried to warn you. Unless we committed everything we had, there was no hope of holding those portals. But no, only the *pure* could be risked. And look how that turned out.'

'The order was given.'

Dorn smiled, cynically and without warmth. 'You see, there's your old problem. You never see any fault in Him. You never push back. You never stop, think, say to yourself – is that sensible?' He pressed his great, calloused hands together. 'And now you have this conundrum, the greatest of your existence. You were created to be the embodiment of His will, but we can no longer discover what that is. You are His voice, but He is silent. Can you think for yourself now, captain-general? That is what's required.'

Samonas hardly dared to look at Valdor. No one, not even Russ, who was as much bluster as substance, had ever dared to speak with quite such casual condescension to his master. And yet, when he finally lifted his eyes to that noble countenance, there was no anger there, only a kind of thoughtfulness.

‘We were faithful,’ Valdor said quietly. ‘I watched, while your brotherhood was created. I studied you. I saw the dangers in you from the start, and witnessed the way you fought, and acted, and quarrelled. And still I said nothing. If there had been a time to question an order, perhaps it was then. But the moment passed, and your great success came soon afterwards. I will be honest now, for you have been honest with me. I did not believe you would ever be that deadly. I saw how swiftly you conquered worlds, and said to myself, perhaps *this* is why you were made in the way you were. That was your great victory – you became untouchable.’

Dorn listened warily. Samonas did also.

‘But now we see the errors implicit in your forging,’ Valdor said. ‘I should have spoken earlier. By the time war came to this place, the moment had passed, and we were all trapped by our fates. You say that the defence of the tunnels was doomed? Perhaps so. I have fought in other wars – more than you will ever know – that were also doomed, and they always played some part in His pattern. I still cleave to that. The only element that could not be accounted for,’ and there he looked directly at Dorn, ‘was you.’

Dorn lost his chilly smile.

‘And, as always, the fault lies elsewhere,’ Dorn said. ‘From the first time I met you, Constantin, you were never quite able to keep the disdain from staining your words. Oh, you’ve been polite. I never met a more courteous soul. That doesn’t really cut much with me.’ The primarch stirred himself, sitting forwards in the throne and jabbing a finger at the captain-general. ‘See, for all you look down on us, at least we were *doing*. We were building the empire while you were musing over the finer points of the law that binds you. We were making decisions over which planets would burn and which would be saved. I’d rather have blood on my hands than book-ink.’

For a moment, Samonas thought Valdor might snap then – release the anger that he was surely capable of. Over heartbeats, the two of them held one another’s gaze, as if engaged in some hidden test of will.

‘And yet, the task remains before us,’ Valdor said at last. ‘I came to confer, not to dispute. We know Lupercal will be here soon. You are the Lord Commander. I have invested in me the power of Magisterium. We must speak with one voice from now on, lest further division hamper what preparation remains.’

Dorn looked at the floor, pressing his fingers together in an image of contemplation. Samonas saw the curve of those mighty shoulders, and had a

mental image of the weight of the entire Imperium bearing down on them.

‘I speak as my soul dictates,’ Dorn said slowly. ‘If it appears blunt to you, then it is not intended as such. I do not have time for much else – only truth, now.’ He lifted up his eyes, which were ringed from lack of sleep. ‘And this is the truth. Your power was exhausted in that war. You have fewer than a thousand warriors under arms, and half of them are beneath the Apothecary’s knife. My father is silent, and cannot guide you. Magisterium is an empty word. I have no doubt you will fight when the time comes, and reap as great a tally as you always have, but your place is by the Throne now, not on the walls.’

Samonas listened, unable to keep shame from welling up within him as the primarch reeled off his judgement. The power of the words came not from their delivery, which was issued more in sorrow than disdain, but the fact they were being uttered at all.

‘You have given great service, captain-general,’ said Dorn, working to keep the worst of the hardness from his voice. ‘But this war has moved beyond you. It will be settled by the Legions. If you wish to remain a part of it, you will have to find some way to fit around that.’

The apocalypse came, reaving through the remains of the broken city and rendering it down to flying squalls of dust and wreckage. With the fallen primarch’s destruction, the great pyramid fractured, first leaking brilliant light, then exploding into a whirling column of eye-burning plasma that joined sky to heaven.

Warriors were hurled through the air, cracking against the storm-scoured flanks of the surviving buildings. Tanks were overturned as they raced across the causeways, and even the distant silhouettes of Titans were tested, leaning into the hurricane while it tore at them.

Samonas gripped the tower’s balustrade hard, feeling the unnatural storm drive into him like a blow. His sentinel blade was ripped from his grip and spun away into the maelstrom. Far below, out on the great plaza, the Wolf King strode through the tumult, roaring out in anger and frustration. His armour had been turned as black as jet, seared by the magics of his great enemy, and the edges of his mighty sword blazed with an impotent fury.

Valdor stood tall, staring impassively into the racing tempest. His cloak snapped and writhed around him like a living thing, though his body remained rigid, untouched, still splendid despite the bloodshed and the raw horror of a Legion’s ending.

Samonas struggled to keep his feet. He could feel the tower's stones shift underfoot. Cracks snaked up the stonework, blowing the mortar from the joints.

'Lord,' he urged, struggling to keep standing. 'We must withdraw.'

Valdor remained still, his gauntlets clutching his spear. Unearthly screams from below added to the tidal wave of noise. Lesser pyramids collapsed in on themselves, flickering with multi-hued lightning as they slid into oblivion.

'Lord,' Samonas tried again.

'He has unleashed something he does not understand,' Valdor said, staring at the distant Russ and speaking slowly and deliberately. 'Just as Magnus did before him. What is it with them all? Where did they get this monstrous *pride?*'

More flagstones cracked, and Samonas heard the sighing creak of breaking stone. There was no sign of the primarch of the Thousand Sons now, only the endless bellows of his assassin. He lurched over to Valdor across the tilting flags, daring to reach out to pull him back from the edge.

But at last the captain-general turned away. As the debris of a world's demise blew about them in furious eddies, he finally reached up to remove his helm. It came loose with a hiss, and Valdor inhaled the first unfiltered air of doomed Prospero.

The captain-general was furious. Never before had Samonas witnessed such raw anger on that normally implacable face.

'They are the architects of this,' Valdor said, speaking to the storm. 'All of them.'

He turned to look at his thrall.

'It could have been prevented,' he said grimly. 'Yet when the hour came, we merely watched them being born.'

The tower remained dark. Promised aid from the Mechanicum never came. The forges rang each day and each night, and still there were not enough blades for the few who were able to wield them. More died on the medicae slabs, as even their gene-tempered bodies were unable to resist the lingering cankers carried by daemon-blades.

In the days following Valdor's meeting with Dorn, Samonas' attention was consumed by a thousand tasks. Those who still survived needed tending. Those who were able to fight needed to be re-equipped. In times past the tower had been able to obtain anything it required with ease. Now things

were harder, and the Legio's voice was diminished. There were rumours abroad that more Legions were returning, running for Terra ahead of Horus' advance, and minds were turned towards that hope. In such an environment, the Custodians retreated back into the shadows, overlooked by all, save perhaps Malcador, who was smothered by his own burdens.

For all that, battle-readiness gradually returned. The tower was re-manned and fortified, equipment and materiel was steadily put back to use, and throughout it all the ceaseless watch over the Throne room never slackened. Ancient duty-patterns were re-examined, and provisions made for the deployment of the remaining Custodian Guard when the need came, together with those few Sisters of Silence who had made it out of the subterranean killing ground.

Samonas trained as hard as any of his brothers. He finally received a new sword, bereft of the fine carvings that he had loved, but deadly nonetheless. He entered the fight-cages with a different attitude than before. The old superlative certainties were gone, replaced by something new – the tinge of vengeance. He detected the same in all those who had returned from the slaughter. They would take the shame that they could not erase, and turn it into yet another marginal gain, a way to fight faster and better than those who came to eradicate the last of them.

Whenever he thrust his new sword, Samonas remembered that final look in Dorn's tired eyes. *This war has moved beyond you.* That would be the challenge now, the spur forever dug in their flesh, goading them out of grief and into wrath.

In that time, Valdor was the most active of them all, deprived of the support of the tribunate that had ever been the most active force in the Legio's workings, but also freed of the more onerous demands of the Senatorum Imperialis and able to devote his formidable energies to his own order.

Samonas was not summoned into his presence for a long time. When he next saw his master, it was on the cusp of the Khan's anticipated return, and all Terra was looking up to the void rather than into the depths of the sprawling Palace.

He climbed the long winding stair leading to the observation parapet atop the tower's northern edge. From there, the view looked out towards the colossal fortifications of the Inner Palace, still being added to, re-fortified,

over and over, as if caught up in a kind of obsession. The sun was setting, casting a dark red pall over the haze of construction.

The captain-general was waiting for him, looking out at the landscape of incipient siege.

‘You are disappointed in me, vestarios,’ he said.

Samonas, taken off guard, began to issue a denial.

‘You think I should have challenged the Lord Commander.’ Valdor turned to face him. ‘Do you believe, truly, that I would not have been up to the contest?’

‘Far from it, lord.’

‘You and I have witnessed the results of strife between brothers. No alien power did this to us – we turned on one another, driven by pride and human resentment. I will not add to it.’

Samonas bowed. He could understand that, but still the insults rankled.

‘So what now?’ he asked cautiously.

‘The Emperor will speak again,’ said Valdor. ‘He repairs what we were unable to preserve. The silence will not last. Until then, our task is to endure.’

‘Nothing more than that?’

Valdor’s lips creased in the approaches of a smile. ‘You wish for more.’ He looked up into the heavens, to where shoals of atmospheric transports hovered between wings of gunships. A far greater fleet had mustered beyond sight, standing guard over the Throneworld, set against the coming hour of attack. ‘We saw the Eighteen arrive, we saw them fall, we will see them slip away again. What they perceive as weakness is what shields us from their mistakes.’

The sunset deepened, and shadows pooled between the spires.

‘Both of them invoked Magisterium, Dorn and Russ,’ Valdor said. ‘They think of that as the exercise of power. I do not blame them – they are creatures of power, built to dominate. But they are wrong. The term is older than that. It is the interpretation of the truth, discovered through communion with the source. We are interpreters of it, not masters. We are slaves to it. That is our first lesson. All others are secondary.’

In the eastern sky, the faint pinprick of stars became visible, their brilliance obscured by the growing palls of urban smog.

‘Could this have been prevented?’ Samonas asked.

Valdor did not look at him. His eyes remained fixed on the darkening sky.

‘Why ask what cannot be known?’ he said. ‘This is the fate we have been given.’

Across the cityscape, marred by the Lord Commander’s fortifications, floodlights switched on. The great hulk of the Inner Palace, the structure that shielded the Emperor as much as it now imprisoned Him, turned a bloody hue from them.

‘He will speak,’ said Valdor, his voice firm with certainty. ‘All things repeat themselves. Our time will come again.’

NOW PEALS MIDNIGHT

John French

‘Time is relentless. Fate is remorseless. We cannot outrun the future – we can only endure it.’

– attributed to the Emperor at the outset
of the First War of Unification

Five Hours to Midnight

‘Are you certain?’ Rogal Dorn, Praetorian of Terra, primarch of the VII Legion, looked at Armina Fel. The old astropath had always been frail, and now was little more than bones and skin driven by will.

‘As certain as we can be,’ she replied.

‘There has been no word from the system edge,’ he said.

‘Not yet, but there will be,’ said Armina. ‘The light will follow the words, the fire…’

‘How soon do you estimate?’

‘Soon, lord, hours at most.’

She lapsed into silence, and Dorn turned away, looking out at the night beyond the worn stone parapet of the Bhab Bastion.

The Imperial Palace gleamed in his sight. Flares of burning gas from disposal furnaces breathed from stacks. Lights blinked on the tips of spires, and beneath that the glow of millions of windows seeped up to smudge the dark to a muddy orange. Gun batteries clung to the stone, barrels pointed at the sky. Clusters of macro shield generators squatted amongst the colonnades and walkways like ticks burrowed into the mane of a lion. Layers of armour-clad buildings, hiding their elegance beneath slabs of metal shaped to deflect shell impacts. Between the scabs of armour lay kilometres of structures that had been marked as snare grounds. Porous to attack, they were laced with mines and traps both small and vast. In the battles to come – battles that had seemed constantly threatening and yet somehow distant – these areas would be allowed to fall. Their purpose was to draw in as many of the enemy as possible before being reduced to rubble and flame. And around them the guns of the Palace that was now a fortress would howl into the sky as the beauty of its past burned from its face.

‘The last grains of the future now fall and become the dust of the past,’ he said softly.

‘You sound as though this is the end, my lord,’ she said.

‘It is, after a fashion.’

Clouds scudded across the night sky. The lights of the Palace caught their edges, turning them into shapes of fire-orange and grey shadow.

Half a kilometre west of the bastion, the first of the shield generators began to test fire. Blisters of energy snapped into place across the heavens, shimmered and then vanished before snapping back into place. Snow began to fall as the shield interface met the moisture of the clouds. Threads of lightning flashed between them.

‘I came to you first, lord. The message will pass to the Sigillite, of course, unless you wish to tell him personally…’

‘He will know already,’ said Dorn, still watching the flare light of the shield tests. ‘He always does.’

‘And the Khan and Lord Sanguinius?’

‘Tell them,’ he said. ‘Tell them everything, and tell them I will attend with them shortly on the eastern prospect.’

‘And *the* signal?’

Dorn was silent for a second.

‘Not yet,’ he said at last.

Armina Fel opened her mouth to say something, and then closed it.

‘Not yet,’ he said again, his voice low and his eyes far away. In the distance, the next in the chain of shield generators began to fire. The sequence would march across the thousands of kilometres of the Palace, treading behind the fall of night. So large was the Palace that four hours separated the onset of darkness at the eastern gates from its arrival at the westernmost reaches. But midnight was the hour when night balanced above the Dome of Unity, and that moment still waited to pass.

‘One night we shall look up and see the heavens burning.’ The words came to him like a whisper breathed by a ghost.

‘My thanks, mistress,’ he said, and began to walk towards the stairs down into the mass of the bastion. The astropath’s face twitched as though her eyelids were trying to blink over the empty sockets of her eyes. ‘Thank you for this, and for everything.’

‘I am sorry,’ she called after him, but he did not turn.

‘Recheck all data inputs,’ said Admiral Su-Kassen.

‘They are functioning within parameters,’ droned the senior lexmechanic after a few seconds. ‘The current visualisation of data is accurate.’

‘Check it again,’ she said.

‘Admiral–’

‘Check it again.’

She waited while the lexmechanic bent to his task, and tried to keep the worry from her face. She was not prone to anxiety, and that made the thoughts drumming against the inside of her skull all the more concerning.

On a screen suspended at the centre of the Bhab Bastion command chamber, the frequency of hostile and potentially hostile incidents across the Solar System glowed in orange numerals on black. Tactical code flowed in a raw stream beneath. In the last years the numbers had often been a blur and the code flow a smeared cascade. Now the numerals held steady, barely ticking over. Around the chamber, command officers sat silent at their consoles. In times of crisis the chamber surged with voices, signal bleed and the hum and clatter of cogitators. Even in lulls in activity a low hum of tension rolled through the air like the voice of an ocean growling beneath a calm surface.

Now the quiet screamed.

‘The data inputs are correct, and the current visualisation is accurate, admiral,’ said the lexmechanic. She nodded acknowledgement, and felt her worry grow as she discarded one of the more comforting possibilities of what was happening. As watch officer for Primary Solar Command, she was effectively the person in charge of the system’s defences at that moment. It was not a position that favoured uncertainty.

‘Get me a direct vox connection to the astropath enclave,’ she said.

‘Admiral, the Praetorian is approaching,’ said Lieutenant Cator, the senior Imperial Fists officer in the chamber.

A moment later the doors opened.

Su-Kassen came to attention as Rogal Dorn entered. Across the chamber senior officers and Imperial Fists followed suit. The officers manning the banks of data and signal machinery remained seated, their eyes locked on their screens. Su-Kassen gave a brief salute, which Dorn answered with a nod as he moved through the chamber.

Spheres of holo-light rotated in the air above them. Terra, Luna, the planets, clouds of warships, defence platforms and void fortresses all hung in the dark. She watched Dorn’s eyes take in the status of each of the five spheres of defences with a glance. In his mind there would now be a mirror of that information. She was a crusade-grade command officer with bio and memetic conditioning, and it took her fifteen minutes to comprehend the

system’s status every time she took command. A human without her ability and training would be utterly lost. That almost casual way Dorn assimilated something so complex, was one of the measures by which she tried to understand the gap between a human and a primarch.

Some thought all the primarchs beyond understanding. She did not. In her eyes Dorn was more than human, but more similar than different. His nature was exalted, not alien. He suffered and dreamed and worried. The stone of his nature came from control, from willing it so. And the will of a primarch was enough to crush empires.

Dorn’s eyes settled on Su-Kassen.

‘Cancel your communication request to the astropaths,’ he said. ‘It is unnecessary.’

‘Lord, all conflict and warning indicators are down and holding steady.’ She paused, rare hesitation finding a hook in her words. ‘It has been like this for two hours.’

‘Your assessment?’ said Dorn.

‘I have none,’ she said. ‘There is no cause that I can find or deduce. The effect is system wide, not localised. The riots in the northern hives have guttered out. The last communication from the Ardent Reef said that there were no signs of vessels of any type approaching the outer system, and that there had been none for the previous forty-six hours. Camba Diaz reports that there have been no launches from the surface of Mars. It’s as if…’ Her voice trailed off.

‘As if what, admiral?’ asked Dorn, his voice level and his face unreadable.

‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘I have no credible tactical assessment to share, lord.’

‘But you have an impression, a feeling. Please speak it.’

Kassen bowed her head in assent.

‘It is as if a shadow is falling across the system, a shadow that quiets even the battles that already burn here.’

Dorn held her gaze for a moment, and then looked around slowly, eyes taking in everything.

‘Stand down to secondary status for four hours,’ said Dorn at last. ‘Cator will take the watch. All command staff to rotate off post across all sectors.’

Su-Kassen blinked at him, though she kept the confusion from her face.

‘My lord, I don’t–’

‘Get some rest, Niora,’ he said, using her birth name for the first time in the decades they had known each other.

She felt the frown form on her face.

‘Nothing will happen that requires you to be here. Not yet.’

Her face became still, and in stillness understanding passed between the demigod and the human warrior. She felt suddenly very cold, but there was a calm to the sensation. She let out a slow breath.

‘As you command, lord,’ she said.

He gave the smallest nod, and she bowed, before turning to issue the orders. He walked to the door that led out of the chamber.

She saw him pause on its threshold and look back at the rotating image of Terra and the Solar System. For a second she saw the light catch in the depths of his eyes, and he nodded, and walked out through the doors leading to the rest of the Palace. She watched him, wondering where he was going, then the doors sealed and the sight of him was lost to her.

Four Hours to Midnight

‘The future is dead, Rogal Dorn. It is ashes running through our hands…’

He heard the ghost speak from his memory as he walked on. Two of his huscarl bodyguards shadowed him, one moving ahead, one following behind. The sounds of their armoured feet echoed cold against the stone. Above them the bundles of cables stapled to the ceiling hummed. Down he walked, past chambers in which humans crouched over sensor screens, and listened to the hiss of signals sifted from the air of Terra.

‘We will put the work back when this is done…’

On through the night-darkened halls, past the avenues of pillars filled with the light of candles, under the banners hanging like skins of shadow. Ever since it had become a fortress, the Palace never slept, and it did not sleep now. It had simply slid into the night and become still, just as the hands of a chrono were still in the last minute before striking the hour.

‘He saw this Heresy coming in his visions. That is the truth you fear. You wish you had listened…’

On, step by step, his eyes seeing all, his ears hearing the hush of the Palace drawn through its stone lungs, the Praetorian walked towards midnight.

Nearly two thousand kilometres away, in the barrack caves bored into the Ganjar Mesa, Seplin Tu picked her way through the clusters of people. Her autogun banged against her back as she moved, but she kept the bowl of soup held between her fingertips steady. A yell followed her as her foot found a sleeping body. She called apologies, but kept her eyes on the space

just in front of her. Around her the sea of people went on and on, clustered around their cooking fires. Some slept, others ate, a few laughed, the sound ricocheting off the stone walls. Some were old, some too young. Brothers and sisters sat together, muttering memories and hope to each other. A woman, her arms thick with gang tattoos, stripped and reassembled an ancient-looking lasgun as Seplin passed.

She could see the spot she was aiming for, there, just under a pillar of rock whose surface glittered in the flicker of the chemical fire burning in a drum at its base. A figure lay beside the fire, wrapped in a ragged blanket.

‘I brought you some soup,’ she said, crouching down and holding out the bowl. ‘Still warm, I think.’

Her father lifted his head, blinking, eyes distant, and then he saw her and pulled himself up to seated. He winced and only just managed to bite back the gasp of pain.

‘Do you–’ she began, putting the soup down on the floor and reaching for him.

‘I’m fine!’ he snapped. Then took a breath and smiled at her. She ignored the fresh pain that flashed in his eyes from the effort. He picked up the soup, blew on it, and took a sip.

‘Any news?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘Nothing,’ she said, and did not add that there had been no rumours running the queues to the provender tents. That had worried her, though she did not know why.

‘This will be over soon anyway,’ her father said as he sipped the soup. ‘You’ll see. Nothing is going to happen. You see if this doesn’t turn out to be just a way to clear the block levels and take what we have.’

Seplin frowned.

‘There’s a lot of people here for it to be a way to get hold of what people in the blocks have.’

‘Someone has something, others will want to take it.’

‘Careful,’ she said as the bowl wobbled to his lips, her eyes darting over the creases of his face. The grey-and-black uniform he had been given hung off him. His hair fell in lank, iron-grey streaks down his head. In the light of the chemical flame, his skin looked like clammy marble. He should never have left the block. He should never have been issued a uniform let alone a weapon. But the draft harvesters had taken the population by the block, and

counted them by passing them through hundred-metre-long pens. If you could walk they took you, and her father could walk. Barely.

‘We’ll be lucky if they haven’t levelled the district to build some new tower dock,’ he said as he sipped. ‘But they won’t keep us here long – costs too much. You’ll see, all done by the turning of the year.’

Seplin pursed her lips, frown deepening.

‘They gave us bullets…’ she said softly, thinking of the forty autogun rounds tucked into her pockets and pouches. They had told them over the vox-horns that there would be inspections, and anyone who did not have their ammunition would be shot. There had been shootings amongst the conscripts already, but no inspections. Even so, Seplin had made sure she and her father kept their allocations and weapons close. She only knew how to fire a gun because he had shown her once. That had been when her sister came back from her time as a caravan guard. That was why Seplin hadn’t tried to duck the draft. She knew how to shoot at least, and that was more than many in the militias.

Her father licked his lips and took another sip of his soup.

‘All done by the turning of the year…’ he muttered. Far off someone laughed. His head turned to look in the direction of the noise.

‘Careful,’ she said, and steadied the bowl of soup as it wavered in his hand.

Three Hours to Midnight

Archamus waited in the gloom of the Qokang Oasis. He leant on the balustrade. Beneath him lay the great pool. Silver from the moonlight falling through the opening in the great dome above rippled across the surface. Above him the thin ropes of water drained from the turbine sluices. Only weeks before he would not have been able to see the pool for the spray from the great cascade. The thunder of falling water would have filled his ears. Now the splash of the draining water was just a murmur.

‘You know what this means?’ said Andromeda-17 from beside him. The Luna gene-witch sat on the balustrade, legs dangling over the drop. He looked at her. She shrugged and her chromed dreadlocks twitched across her shoulders. ‘Why he summoned you now, I mean?’

‘I do not presume to be certain,’ he said.

‘But you *know*. Some things you don’t need to hear. You can feel them. Tonight there is not a person between here and the edge of the sun’s light who does not *know*. In all the quiet places there are people feeling the

silence grow around them. Humans are like that – deep down we are still animals crouching in a forest listening for the howls of wolves…' She was looking up at the shafts of moonlight, and he noticed that her eyes had a look that he had never seen before. 'We used to do that, you see, when we were a species teetering on the edge of survival – we would go quiet and still and hope that the growl we could barely hear was just the wind in the trees, and the shadows beneath the moon were just shadows… We carry that memory, all of us. Our blood remembers…'

He remained silent, and the sound of the draining water filled the stillness. At last she looked around at him. She gave a cold laugh and shrugged.

'Not the most comforting thought, I'll admit.' He shook his head but did not answer. She frowned, her gaze steady on him.

'You are thinking–'

'We are not ready,' he growled softly.

'You were never going to be ready,' she said. 'None of you – not Dorn, not you, not all the guns of Terra. You were never going to be ready.'

'With more time–'

'There is not time enough to prepare for this.' She picked up a loose chip, and dropped it over the edge. She leant forwards to watch for the splash. 'It is a matter of the soul, that is why you are not ready.'

He felt himself tense. Andromeda laughed at his discomfort.

'My kin of the Selenar believe that the soul lies not outside us but in our blood, in the memory of our genes. They would say that there is no way for mankind to be ready for this. What is happening and what is to come will leave a scar in the blood. It will change the soul of mankind and all of its offspring. In ten thousand years this will be the memory that sings in the soul of all. If that time comes, then we will be ready to face this again.'

'If we fail now then that future will never come.'

'You doubt that you will survive? And there I thought that I – with my gene-witch ways and strange insight – was supposed to be the pessimist.'

'Failure is always possible even if you never surrender to it.'

Andromeda glanced at him, an expression he could not read on her face. She was rolling another shard of rock around her hands.

'You did not fail him,' she said. 'And *he* did not fail even in the end. You bear his name but there is no burden that you must carry. I did not say you will fail. I said that you would never be ready. The two are different.'

Archamus did not reply, but shifted. The black cloak hanging from his shoulders suddenly seemed as unfamiliar as the name that still did not seem to belong to him.

He let out a breath to speak.

The signal system in the collar of his armour hissed, and whispered a series of coded clicks. Archamus turned, clamping his helm onto his head.

‘He is coming,’ he said. Andromeda dropped the stone over the edge, but did not watch it fall. She slid to her feet beside him.

Archamus’ brother-huscarl came out of the dark first, bolter ready. Identification signals clicked between him and Archamus as he advanced. Caution, even amongst brothers, was a lesson the last years had taught well.

Will our blood remember that death of trust, too? he found himself thinking.

Rogal Dorn stepped into sight, the burnished gold of his armour seeming silver in the moonlight. Archamus bowed his head briefly. The huscarls never knelt in the presence of their lord; they were his praetorians and war companions, and the duty of their office was sign of deference enough. It was another change that Archamus still found unsettling.

‘My lord,’ he said. Dorn met his gaze as Archamus raised his head.

‘Follow,’ said the primarch, and moved past them, his strides swift but unhurried.

Andromeda dropped off the balustrade and followed with Archamus.

‘You know why you and Archamus were summoned, Mistress Andromeda?’ asked Dorn without slowing or turning.

‘You find it reassuring to have him at your side,’ she said without hesitating.

Dorn glanced over his shoulder, and Archamus thought he saw a flash in his lord’s eye. Andromeda shrugged.

‘Yes, Lord Praetorian, I know why.’

‘And you know where I am going?’

‘You are going to look at the sky,’ she said.

Dorn did not answer, and they followed him through the echoing dark of the Palace.

Two Hours to Midnight

‘Strength and truth shall be its future, but for now it will serve us as a place of slaughter. And this will be a slaughter…. That is the price of that future.’

Rogal Dorn's own voice followed him as he walked beneath the Dome of Unity. The voices of others wound through his thoughts, on and on, shouting from the silence. He thought of all the steps he had taken in his life, all the decisions made, and all those that now seemed to have a different meaning to what he had thought at the time.

'It will never end, don't you see that? Hate only breeds hate and the Imperium cannot be built upon such bloody foundations.'

'You are not my son. And no matter what your future holds, you never will be.'

'The Imperium will not survive if it does not die, brother…'

'Ash running through our fingers…'

'I am not your son…'

'*Lord Praetorian.*' His personal vox cut through the voices of ghosts.

'Speak, mistress,' he said, subvocalising into his armour's vox so that neither Archamus, Andromeda or the other huscarls would hear.

'*Word has come,*' said Armina Fel. '*As instructed, it has not been broadcast to the astropaths across the system. Do you wish the signal sent?*'

'When will the first lights appear?' he asked.

'*Two hours,*' she said.

Two hours…

'Thank you, mistress,' he said and cut the link.

He turned to Archamus. The sight of a young warrior's face bearing that name pulled another voice from the edge of night.

'What are you afraid of?'

'That others will die for my weakness. That I will fail.'

'Prepare a signal to all Legion formations,' he said.

Above the Palace the Arcus orbital plate drifted on the edge of the atmosphere. Captain Demetrius Katafalque watched night slide across the face of the viewport. Pinpricks of light dotted the spreading dark, clustering in the shapes of the great city drifts, space ports and hive clusters. He knew every detail of that view at night, in day, and reimagined in the endless strategic holo-displays that filled the hours he was not on the wing with the rest of his Assault company. The hours that remained were given to waiting.

In the distance he heard the hiss of a hatch release, but did not turn.

On the other side of the plate he could have looked out and seen the reaches of space. Long ago, the first ancients to touch the void beyond the sky would have had only the stars to greet them. Now the night side of Terra

glittered with the lights of warships. System monitors; converted trade tugs; mass conveyors carrying Terra's void-borne reserve forces; war-barques whose keels had been set in a time before Unity and empire was a dream; missile pinnaces so young that their weapons had never spoken in anger: all arranged in constellations that crowded the blackness as the light of Terra spidered the darkening ground.

'Captain,' said the voice of Getterax, from behind him. He turned, surprised. The master of signal assigned to the Arcus orbital plate rarely left the command cluster at its core.

'A signal has come from Terra, direct transmission from the primarch's Legion communication channel.'

Katafalque blinked. He was not given to surprise, or at least inside his mind the gap between surprise, assessment and clear action was so short that it barely existed. But the communications that controlled the intersecting layers of defence around Terra were precise. The signals and command channels were designated, as were the contingencies and backups. None of them included communication directly from the primarch.

'It was sent to all Legion area commanders throughout the first through third spheres.'

'Only to the Legion?'

'Yes, captain.'

He blinked again.

'What did it say?'

'It is gene-encrypted for you alone,' said Getterax, holding out an iron-framed data-slate. Katafalque took it, released his armour gauntlet and pressed his thumb against the aperture at the base of the frame. A needle stabbed into his flesh and withdrew with a sip of his blood. Green static filled the screen and then coalesced into script. He read the words, and was still for a long moment.

'Bring the Legion contingents in the plate to full readiness. It is to be done quietly and thoroughly. Check that all command-and-control functions are at optimal.'

'Of course, captain…' Getterax paused. The bulbous signal and vox-module ringing his head did not hide the signs of the frown he was suppressing. 'You wish this done without bringing the other forces on the plate to equal readiness?'

Katafalque nodded. ‘That will happen but before it does we must be ready. We are the rock that the storm surges around, Getterax.’

He turned back to the viewport. Night had now run across all the visible surface. He recognised the lights of Bhab, Dhawalagiri and Gravula.

None of them know, he found himself thinking. *Those sleeping this night do not know what truth they will wake to.*

‘If I may ask, captain–’

‘Full system invasion alert to be issued in two hours. Stand ready. Look to those who will look to us. The hour is come, my sons.’ Katafalque spoke the words he had read, and looked around at his Legion brother. He thought of the warriors of the IX and V Legions scattered between Terra and the dark beyond. He thought of the billions of mortal soldiers, some who were only soldiers by a few weeks. He thought of all the nights and days when it had seemed that the enemy had come to the heart of the Imperium. All had been false, some provoked, some dreamed from fear and fatigue. But now, on this quiet night, the dreams would end.

One Hour to Midnight

The ice wind coming up the valleys of the Himalazia greeted Dorn as he took the last steps onto the parapet. The smell of the work camps, which had scented the air while he was making the Palace into a fortress, had gone. Now the air smelled of smoke and the promise of snow. They were burning the last of any structures within a kilometre of the wall, clearing a killing ground.

He paused after he took the top step. Then nodded once and climbed up onto the parapet. Plasteel plates now hid the view beyond, allowing only a firing slit view for most of the length of the wall. On this small section, pistons had lowered the plates so that the sky above and the night horizon were visible. His brothers waited for him there.

The Khan’s armour was ash-white, with fresh marks of red on its plates. His face was solemn and his stillness seemed to vibrate the air around him. Beside him stood an angel in burnished gold armour and crimson cloth. Sanguinius turned to look at Dorn, and a conversation passed in the meeting of their gazes. Around the pair stood warriors of their Legion, and a small clutch of humans. Archamus, Andromeda and the huscarls formed a loose ring behind Dorn as he stopped two paces from his brothers.

‘Praetorian,’ said Sanguinius, bowing his head. The Khan gave a short nod.

‘It is true,’ said the Khan, as though cutting to the end of a conversation that had passed unspoken. ‘My astropaths brought me word half an hour after your message arrived.’

Dorn thought of the news Armina Fel had brought him as the sun had set above the Bhab Bastion.

‘The auguries all confirm it. There is a quieting in the warp, a silence moving and growing like a storm cloud. It has been growing darker and darker. It is a warp displacement, the bow wave of something approaching through the skin of dreams. It is like… On worlds where there are oceans, the seas become flat before the coming of a tidal wave. The waves draw down the shore as the deeps draw breath.’ She had paused. Shivered.

‘I understand,’ he had replied.

Dorn looked at the Khan and nodded. Along a near section of the wall, the void shields began to test fire, crackling through the dry air as midnight drew closer across the Palace.

High above them – almost hidden by the flash of the shields and the lights of warships – a new star formed in the darkness, growing brighter and brighter.

On the walls of the Imperial Palace the three loyal sons of the Master of Mankind looked up as the first notes of sirens began to sound.

DREAMS OF UNITY

Nick Kyme

We are the thunder,
we are the lightning,
We were His first,
but now amongst the last,
We lived too long,
and now we wish to die,
The only death that matters,
the Honoured Death.
– Dahren Heruk, hymn of the Honoured Death

As I looked down onto the fight below, I knew Kabe was going to die. And I was powerless to do anything about it.

He would not yield. He roared, a broken jaw distorting his shout of defiance. The man trying to kill him remained undaunted. Even when Kabe spat blood onto his war-plate, the gold-clad warrior would not be goaded.

Instead, he levelled his spear and Kabe readied his falchion in kind. The sword's blade had become a ragged saw, notched by repeated ineffectual blows against the other warrior's armour. Kabe did not know how to lose. He had never retreated in his life. Even when the oligarchs of Kievan Rus had rained atomics from their black citadel and bathed the Sibir ice plain in radioactive fire, Kabe had advanced. He had fought without rest during the siege of Abyssna, and marched the length of Albia to bring the warlord clans of Hoth Grendal to heel.

'For Unity!' Kabe roared, his broken sword aloft in salute.

He charged, but his left leg failed him and he slipped, his body not as stubborn as his mind.

Kabe stopped when the spear impaled him, his armour easily pierced. The spear haft lodged in his guts, the leaf-bladed edge having punched right through and out of his back on the other side. He dangled there for a moment, blinking dumbly, before the gold-clad warrior kicked his body loose. Silence hung in the air, suspended by shock and disbelief.

Then the crowd roared. Light flooded the arena, a cold and harsh sodium glow that threw grim shadows over a shallow pit of sand and half-crushed bones.

Blood pooled under Kabe's body. He trembled, still alive, mouth agape and trying to catch air like a landed fish.

'Damn it,' Tarrigata murmured. 'It's over then.' The old man standing next to me suddenly looked frail. Perhaps it was the thought of the money he had lost betting on Kabe, or perhaps it was because his ludus had just lost another fighter. His once fine garments had begun to look a little threadbare of late.

I spared him a half-glance as I leaned in to the arena barrier, ignoring the jostling crowd around us. I saw enough grief in his face to suggest his apparent fragility stemmed from something deeper than a blow to his ever-diminishing revenue stream. Fewer and fewer patrons turned up to the fights these days. They had other concerns on their minds, about war, about the killings and the riots. For the rest, this was how they forgot.

The gold-clad warrior advanced, whirling around the spear as he poised to stab down at Kabe.

The crowd roared louder in anticipation of the kill.

'Heruk, is it over?' Tarrigata asked, and I felt his thin fingers brush against my naked arm. 'I can still hear them baying. Is it over? Has that chrono-gladiator not killed him yet?'

'Stay here,' I said, and felt Tarrigata's fingers fall away as I leapt the plate barrier and jumped into the arena. The sand underfoot scattered as I landed.

A few onlookers noticed me and began to chant. I heard my name and felt the chill of hollow glory that came with it. Battle was glorious; Mount Ararat when Arik Taranis raised the Lightning Banner and declared Unity, *that* was glorious. This was gutter glory. There was no honour is this.

The gold-clad warrior's spear stabbed down before he realised there was another fighter in the ring. Kabe screamed, the leaf-blade stuck in his thigh. A second thrust pierced his shoulder and brought another scream.

'If you're going to kill him, kill him,' I growled, glowering at the hulking warrior's back.

We had all suffered enough already. This was needless.

The crowd roared louder, their faces hidden by the darkness now, and I was half-blinded by the glare of sodium lights anyway.

My eyes were better than Tarrigata's, but they were not what they once had been. I blinked twice, trying to banish the blind spots as the warrior turned. A chrono-gladiator, over-muscled on stimms and sheathed in gold armour plate. I saw a parody of His Adeptus Custodes in the grossly swollen

fighter before me and could not resist a smile. Down here beneath the Maw, we were far from the Throne's light, but we still found humour despite our misery.

The death clock in the fighter's forehead turned. His owner, Radik Clev, would be close and waiting with a key. Victory for the chrono would see another key turn in the death clock. More life for more life. That's how it worked with a chrono. I only had meagre honour to fight for. What was that against trying to perpetuate one's existence?

The spear turned, the change in grip unnecessarily elaborate, and it pointed at me. The chrono's eyes were bloodshot, the veins threading the sclera describing madness. As the death clock ticked down, its strikes grew louder. Like a heartbeat. He bayed at me, more beast than man. The challenge was deep and vox-modulated enough to make it sound inhuman. But then again, I was not really human either.

I bared my teeth in a feral snarl, the rekindling of some old instinct, and drew a broad-bladed sword. My thumb activated the disruptor field, which flickered dangerously, once, twice, before snapping to consistency. Heat and ozone filled my nostrils. There was oil and blood, too, but that was coming off the chrono. And Kabe as he bled out. I could see him, reaching impotently for his broken falchion.

'Should've just killed him,' I said.

The chrono charged.

I rolled, swinging my broad-blade behind me as I made to move. I heard the crowd gasp and felt the spear miss my head by a few inches. Back on my feet, I managed to turn and see the spear before it gutted me. A hasty parry deflected it aside, but I had been lucky. And too slow.

A second thrust almost wrenched away my sword, the strength behind the blow horrific enough to rock me on my heels. I rolled again, old bones and tired muscles beginning to work. This time I came up faster, inside the chrono's guard and well within the reach of the spear. I hacked at the crease in the chrono's arm, at the elbow. It wasn't a bad wound, but his armour was weak in that spot and my blade bit deep. The chrono howled and his grip on the spear faltered. Hard to hold on to something that long and heavy when your tendons are screaming.

He swung the haft crosswise, and though I had prepared for the riposte, it still stung like the impact from a shock grenade and I was smashed across the arena floor.

Cheers erupted from the crowd. I ignored them.

My blurring vision fixed on my enemy.

Bleeding oil and blood, the chrono stomped towards me. He held the spear close to his body and used his other hand to steady it. That would impede his reach. He was two metres away, about to thrust, when I flung my broad-blade. It spun in the air, the slightly curved edge and weighted pommel enhancing the velocity of the throw. It struck the chrono's centre mass, breaching the gold breastplate and making a mess of whatever was beneath.

He stared dumbfounded, the spear still poised, as if recorded via a pict-feed abruptly set to pause, before slumping to his knees and dropping his weapon. Scooping up Kabe's sword, I stepped in and swiftly cut off the chrono's head. The death clock struck zero, presaging a now impotent cardiac impulse that would have killed him on the spot were he not already headless.

As the crowd went insane at the spectacle, hollering and spitting vicarious fury, I retrieved my blade and then knelt beside Kabe to return his.

I looked down at the blood pool and saw myself reflected there. Tall, thickly muscled and wearing leather half-armour, I had a warrior's bearing. Facial scarring gave me character some said, and shaved blond hair spoke of a military background. My body was unmarked, apart from the lightning bolt tattoo on my left shoulder. My blue eyes flashed with some of their old vigour. I have been told I am handsome by conventional standards. Vanity was never my curse. I have seen it affect others, allies and enemies. It didn't change how they died. Death is ugly. It makes no allowances for appearance.

'Brother…' I said, gently putting the falchion in Kabe's grasping hand. He seemed to settle, though his mouth still worked in a futile parody of speech.

'There's blood in your lungs, Kabe. Don't try to speak. Be still. It's almost over now.'

He looked at me and the fear in his eyes changed to something approaching peace.

I placed the tip of my sword against his heart. With my other hand, I touched the faded lightning bolt tattoo inked onto his left shoulder.

'The honoured death…' I whispered. Kabe gave a near imperceptible nod. I thrust, and it was done.

Tarrigata met me on the other side of the arena wall. He looked thin in the stark lights, as if his flesh were partly translucent. He sniffed at the air as I clambered over, head tilted to the side so his left ear angled towards me.

‘Is that Kabe? He stinks. Smells dead already.’

I leaned in close, grimacing with Kabe’s dead weight across my right shoulder.

‘Show respect for the Thunder Legion,’ I hissed through clenched teeth.

Despite my massive advantage in both height and weight, Tarrigata looked untroubled.

‘Pah! You’re gladiators now, Heruk.’

‘Old man, I swear I’ll–’ I began.

‘Fewer customers today,’ remarked Tarrigata, breezing past my hollow threat as if it were a fly landed on his collar to be swatted away. ‘A quieter mob.’

‘Fewer everyone,’ I said. ‘Even the great Thunder Legion can’t draw a crowd, eh?’

‘No crowds to draw,’ said Tarrigata. He sniffed, his withered old nostrils flaring. ‘Fear is in the air. Dark dealings abound.’

I snorted at that, having heard Tarrigata’s conspiracies many times before.

‘Besides,’ the old man went on, a cruel smile on his face, ‘you’re not Legion. You haven’t been Legion since Ararat.’

‘He’s right, Heruk. We are nothing now. Just arena fighters, and Tarrigata our dominus.’

‘We are more than that, Vez,’ I said, looking into the eyes of the bearded giant who had just stepped in front of me.

Vezulah Vult carried more scars than any warrior I have known or killed. He wore them proudly. As big as I was, he stood a head taller, his torso and shoulders like an inverted triangle.

‘Are we, Dah?’

I scowled. ‘At least we’re surviving. Here,’ I gently set Kabe down, ‘help me with him.’ Around the arena, a few of the crowd had lingered to catch a glimpse of the fallen gladiator but most had already begun to disperse, back to the Maw, back to their own personal misery.

‘Such a waste,’ spat Tarrigata, and rattled the coin purse that he carried looped to the belt around his waist. He shook it three times, listening.

‘It’s light,’ I said.

‘Don’t need you to tell me that!’ snapped Tarrigata, whirling on me. He jabbed a wizened finger to the hollow sockets of his eyes. ‘I might have lost my eyes, but I still see plenty. Touched by Him above, I was,’ he said,

gesturing to the thickening smog that blanketed our sky. I followed with my eye and saw the vague shapes of statues looming like gods.

‘Your eyes were burned as an astropath, Tarrigata,’ I said.

‘That’s why you should listen when I say dark things are afoot, even here in the Maw. I have *seen* them… from the beyond.’

‘And you are hunted just like the rest of us vermin,’ I added.

Tarrigata showed his yellowed teeth with an ugly smile. ‘Aye, but you still serve, don’t you?’

‘The Legion ever serves,’ Vezulah replied. His voice sounded different as he reached for the axe tethered at his waist.

I seized his arm. ‘Hold, brother,’ I told him firmly. ‘The war is over.’

He looked through me at some latter day battlefield, his eyes clouded and unblinking.

‘Kalagann has mustered a host on the wastes…’ He struggled against my grip and I clenched tighter, my old Legion ring biting into his skin. ‘The hordes of Ursh will fall this day!’

A few stragglers amongst the crowd had turned to look at what was going on.

‘The butchers of Sibir will yield to the Emperor!’

‘They already did. Long ago,’ I said. ‘Take hold of your senses, Vez. Look at me. Look at me.’

He turned, blinked once and released his grip on the axe. I released him.

‘Did I drift again?’ he asked.

I nodded.

‘Where to this time?’

‘Ursh, the Sibir ice plain.’

Vezulah looked down as if to calculate what this fresh slip of his sanity meant for the long term.

‘Are you back, brother?’ I asked. ‘In the here and now?’

‘I am… I am.’

I felt Tarrigata relax behind me, and heard the rad pistol he carried under his robes powering down. He’d never fired it and I wondered how much of its degrading energy coil was leaking lethal radiation into the old man, but he wouldn’t be parted from it. The last of the crowd moved on, seemingly disappointed.

A timeworn shanty town lay just off the outskirts of the arena. Known as the Swathe, it stretched for kilometres across the Outer Palace districts, an

agglomeration of broken ships, industry-grade cargo containers, armour plate and anything else that fell from the smog-choked sky. Tarrigata's hab was the largest in the underbelly, and built to impress. Like the man who owned it, the hab had seen more prosperous times. He was a beggar-king rapidly reverting back to just a beggar.

'Get him up,' said Tarrigata, meaning Kabe's corpse. 'Take what you can use and burn the rest. I don't want scavengers coming around.' He turned, listening again, sniffing at the air.

'And for frek's sake, where is Gairok? I should smell the stink of unrefined alc-grain by now. He's bloody due.'

Underneath an awning outside a granite stoop was a heavy wooden slab. Wood is rare, especially in the Swathe. Tarrigata used it as a mortuary block. He said the wood soaked up the blood, which it did. The slab was run through with dark stains, like a patchy veneer.

Vezulah and I set Kabe's body on it.

'The next fight isn't for a few hours yet,' I said, breaking out the saws and other surgical tools from a caged rack set up next to the mortuary block. I handed one to Vezulah, who began to cut. 'He'll be here.'

'He had better be,' said Tarrigata. 'A death and a no-show… I'll be ruined!'

'Down here, how will any of us ever tell the difference?' I muttered, watching Tarrigata climb up the stoop and into his hab.

Vezulah worked. He had already cut away Kabe's armour, his trappings, and was harvesting the organs now. We were ghouls, those of us who remained. Our continued existence depended on the deaths and successful appropriation of the parts of our former brothers in arms.

As well as being our dominus, Tarrigata possessed the means and craft to transplant those parts. In that respect at least, the relationship was mutually dependant.

Dwelling on the notion of what we had all become, I looked up through a ragged tear in the awning. Yellow cloud cast a filthy pall over everything, but below it I saw the screw-thread circles of the Maw, all the way from uphive to this nadir. If the Maw was the well leading down from Terra above, then the Swathe was the effluvia caught at the bottom.

Factorums and refineries and bullet farms clung to the rings of the Maw like diseased limpets attached to the gullet of a deep-sea leviathan. Occasionally, one of these structures would fall, cast down to us dregs, and

so the shanties would slowly expand, colonising the basin like some septic growth.

Terra looked very different from down here.

‘I still dream of glory, Dah,’ said Vezulah. His voice dragged me back to the present. I feared he might be slipping again, but his eyes were lucid as he butchered Kabe. Machine parts as well as glistening organs sat amongst the useless offal. Work, even red work, helped to focus the mind.

He paused, the knife edge dripping, his arms crimson all the way to the elbow. ‘Sometimes it’s hard to determine whether this or the living present is my reality.’

‘I understand,’ I said softly. ‘All too well.’

Deep down, I know. In my marrow, in my cancer-ridden core, I know.

‘The old days are gone, I know that,’ said Vezulah. ‘The days of the storm, of Unity. They were killing days, red days, of war and conquest. Empires kneeled to Him, they kneeled to us…’ He paused, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the handle of the saw but making no cut. ‘I miss them.’

‘So do I, Vez. But we are not what we once were. We have lived too long. It’s just some of us are too stubborn to die.’

I took the machine parts, Kabe’s old cybernetics, and started to wash them down using an old handle-operated pump. The liquid was unfit to drink and irritated the skin, but it got rid of the blood just fine. The organs went into large apothecary flasks, and were preserved in a viscous solution of formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde and methanol. This I had learned from Tarrigata.

‘You can take those, now,’ said Vezulah. ‘I can manage the burning alone.’ A furnace stood at the back of Tarrigata’s property. Kabe’s final rest.

I nodded, hefting the organ flask, then asked, ‘you are yourself, brother?’

‘I am myself.’

‘And if you are ever not?’

Vezulah met my gaze. His eyes looked steady but resigned. ‘Then grant me the honoured death.’

‘The honoured death,’ I replied, and headed for Tarrigata’s hab.

Inside the hab, the darkness took a little getting used to. It was cramped, the ceiling so low that I had to stoop. Tarrigata was a hoarder. He had shelves of machine parts from old gladiators, and jars of briny liquid filled with slowly atrophying organs. He kept everything regardless of its use. I found him

sitting at a battered plastek chair, bent-backed and frowning over his counting device.

‘Radik Clev will seek recompense for his loss,’ he told me, before leaning back to take a draw of his *kiseru*. A plume of smoke issued from the long-necked pipe, the hairs in the bowl flaring brightly as Tarrigata sucked at them. ‘In turn, this debt shall come to you.’

‘I am sorry, dominus,’ I said, setting down the apothecary flasks wherever I could find space.

‘You killed his fighter, so there is that,’ added Tarrigata, ‘and you also illegally interrupted Kabe’s bout. For that, too, I must pay.’

‘Again, I am sorry.’

‘Sorry does not pay debts!’ he snapped, and a coughing fit wracked his body.

I went to help but Tarrigata warded me off with a trembling hand. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve when the fit was over, before taking a long, shuddering pull of his kiseru.

‘I will make amends,’ I said.

Tarrigata slowly nodded. ‘Yes, you will. Go into the Swathe. Find Gairok. Bring him here or the organ supply will dry up.’

Such things we must do to survive.

‘You have my word, dominus,’ I said, bowing as I made to leave.

‘I don’t care about your word, or your honour, Heruk. Just bring him. And do it fast.’

A vessel hovered just above the smog layer. Its sleek contours shone golden in the light of uphive. A Coronus grav-carrier. It had come from the Tower of Hegemon on a special mission appointed by Valdor himself.

A single warrior sat within the shadowy hold, alone with his thoughts until that moment, his golden battle-helm in both hands.

‘*Ever since Nas’sau have we fought for Terra*,’ said a voice through the warrior’s vox-link, the first he had heard in several hours.

He looked up, green eyes as vivid and bright as emerald. The hold doors began to open, admitting light and atmosphere.

‘*You know what has to be done?*’ asked the voice.

The warrior nodded. ‘I am clear in my duty.’

‘*Find them, Tagiomalchian.*’

Tagiomalchian donned his helmet, and a flurry of systems flickered to life across the retinal display.

He stood, securing his sentinel blade and storm shield. He then attached a monofilament wire to his armour. It was fed by a long spool bolted to the hold, and mag-locked to the auramite with a dull *tunk*. Tagiomalchian approached the yawning hold doors, the wire unspooling as he walked. He perched on the edge, cloak whipping in the breeze, and looked down into the smog-layer. His eyes narrowed behind the lenses of his helm.

'I will find them,' he whispered, before stepping off into oblivion.

The Abyssna burned. I couldn't see it, the smoke was obscuring my vision, but I could smell it and hear it. The burning flesh of the soldiers inside, the crack of stone as the walls baked in the inferno and the shrilling of screams. Unity had come.

Thick ash swept across killing fields outside a grand fortress now swollen with the prince's dead. Their sortie had failed to break our lines and reach our siege guns. The Imperial Army artillerymen, also lost to my sight, had kept up a relentless barrage. Such violent music. My heart beat with it, soaring from its thunderous melody.

Now we pushed, and pushed hard. The Afrik sun blazed. I sweltered in my heavy armour, and the heat from my skin began to fog my visor. Vezulah stood nearby, calling the charge, summoning even greater fury from the Thunder Legion, and the heat intensified.

We ran, having left our grav-ships behind, bolters running hot with continued use.

A round clipped my shoulder guard, penetrated and bit into flesh. I snarled, using anger to quash the pain, and looked to the Lightning Banner. It was almost all I could see through the smoke that wasn't right in front of me.

Somewhere in its vicinity fought the Emperor. Even His presence, remote and unseen, galvanised me. For a few seconds, the smoke thinned and I caught the flash of gold amidst the grey.

'There,' said the voice of Gairok behind me, and I felt his gauntleted hand on my arm subtly directing me. 'Custodians… Lions in the guise of men.'

'So it's said.'

'Shall we show them how the Thunder Legion fights?' he asked, and I turned to see his toothy grin.

I had no time to admire their bloody skill at arms before the smoke swallowed them again.

'Aye, brother!'

Gairok laughed, loud and bold, heedless of the bullets coming at us through the smoke. He gestured into the greyness.

‘Then here’s your chance!’

A deep, resounding crack announced the felling of the northern tower.

‘Let us ram a gladius straight down prince cretin’s throat, eh, Dah?’

Then we were running, our entire cohort, as Vezulah sounded a fresh charge.

‘Do you even know his name, Gairok?’ I asked.

Gairok shook his head. ‘So many petty barons, oligarchs and warlords, what does it matter? All will kneel and embrace Unity, or die. Now we show them how.’

The northern tower fell with slow, inexorable grace. It carved through the smoke like a sword, crumbling and disintegrating with every plummeting foot. The crash when it finally struck the ground shook the battlefield like an earthquake, dispersing huge swathes of smoke and revealing our enemy.

Pale-faced and sweating in grey uniforms under brass breastplates and wearing spiked helms, they looked determined but afraid. They ranked up in files and took careful aim.

Sporadic weapons fire scythed from the breach in the Abyssna’s wall. Mainly carbines and the odd energy cannon. Shields raised, our cohort advanced.

‘Let the reaping begin!’ roared Gairok, and I felt his battle fervour infect me.

I swept through the gap in the wall, leaping over rubble and the wounded trapped under it, and set about those who could still fight.

Bellowing, I cut off a rifleman’s head. I caught a glimpse of Gairok, who cried out, ‘The Afrik sun is hotter in the breach, eh, Dah!’ His blade was reddest of all. Our charge had decimated the defenders. Their ranks buckled, then broke. And then I heard Vezulah shouting. Horns were blowing. Victory neared, but the bloodletting was far from over. I killed two men with a single thrust, impaling both on my sword, but the dead dragged down my arm and I caught a glancing blow to the skull. I felt my helm crack. It had saved my life, but dizziness pushed me to my knees. I spat blood, shook off the pain and nausea, and looked up…

I found myself in the *Silo*, with a burly, half-armoured warrior standing over me. Gone was the Afrik sun, and in its place the dinginess of a lower Swathe dive bar. The warrior had craggy features, with a bald, scar-laced

scalp, and brandished a metal hook. It had the look of an improvised weapon.

Gone the power armour he once wore, a studded leather hauberk now served in its place.

‘Gairok…’ I slurred his name as I tried to piece together the fragments of what had happened between leaving Tarrigata’s and this moment.

Rather than strike me down, Gairok offered his hand. His skin shone red in the flickering lumen light.

‘Stand, brother,’ he said. Aspirated blood spattered his face. The veins in his neck bulged, and he breathed with feverish intensity. The grin that cut a white crescent in his features looked forced. Pained.

‘Gairok,’ I said again, standing and looking around. The dead surrounded us, gutted and torn up, all the wretched patrons of the *Silo*. The sweet, cloying scent of alc-grain mingled with the coppery stench of blood. The floor of the bar shone with it.

‘Did you… did you do this, Gairok?’ I asked, and felt the reassuring grip of my short sword as I slid it from the scabbard.

Gairok blinked, once, twice. His eyes were bloodshot. Sweat lathered his skin. I saw it almost glitter in the lumen light. His grin became a frown, a rabid beast struggling to comprehend its illness. How far was I from such a fate? The hand that gripped the hook tightened, and I felt my body tense.

He had been vital, strong of mind and purpose. I didn’t recognise the man in front of me.

‘Where are you, Gairok?’ I asked, trying to ignore the blood.

I have never seen him so weak. Gairok held the breach at Abyssna. He fought on the Sibir ice plain when the atomics rained down.

‘The Afrik sun is hotter in the breach, Dah,’ he said, but his mind was absent and his words a pale echo of those spoken to me years ago.

‘This isn’t the Abyssna, brother. Gairok… Where are you? Try to think.’

He cast about, lost, searching the dead. None answered. ‘Sibir… No… *hnng*…’ He pressed a hand against his skull as if trying to keep his tattered sanity from spilling out, until his words slurred beyond comprehension.

Then he came at me with the hook, eyes wild, spitting froth.

‘Unity!’ he cried, barely articulate, a moan of despair as much as it was a remembered shout of triumph.

I blocked the overhand blow with my forearm, though Gairok’s strength was ferocious. With the other hand I slid out my short sword and rammed it

deep into my brother’s chest. He struggled at first, madness lending him strength, until I carved and carved, and the blood and innards sluiced out onto the dirty floor. Gairok grew limp and I cradled his body to the ground to stop him from falling.

As he lay there amidst the dismembered corpses of his madness, I gently withdrew my blade.

Blood bubbled in the froth on Gairok’s lips. It reminded me of Kabe.

He blinked again, and I saw some lucidity return in his eyes.

‘We were… not meant… to last.’

The last of his life choked out of him and I held him until it was over. There was blood on his Legion tattoo and I wiped it away before I could no longer hold up my head.

I knew Kabe, I had fought alongside him as a sword-brother, but Gairok had been my friend. I wept for his passing, choking to death in some dirty Swathe bar.

‘Where is the honour for us?’ I asked the darkness, but silence answered.

My own words came back to me then.

We have lived too long.

I got to my feet, heavy with grief, and hauled Gairok onto my back. I wouldn’t leave him here, not like this. Something was wrong with us. I hoped Tarrigata would know what to do.

Tagiomalchian descended through a cloud of smog. The monofilament wire held him steady, thin enough to be invisible to the naked eye, robust enough to harbour a load many times his weight.

Drawn up over armour, the falsehood Tagiomalchian wore kept him hidden from sight.

A counter cycled down on his retinal display. When it hit fifty metres, he disengaged the mag-clamp and fell the rest of the way to the ground. A tiny grav pulse built into his armour cushioned his landing and he rose up from a crouched position to cast his gaze across the vast shanty town before him.

‘Landfall achieved. I remain undetected,’ he said, the sound of his voice baffled by the ambient neutralisers built into his helm array.

The same voice from the Coronus replied, similarly shrouded. Only Tagiomalchian could hear it.

‘*Target location identified*,’ it said over the vox. A hololithic schematic overlaid the terrain Tagiomalchian saw through his retinal lenses. ‘*Your quarry is in the Swathe.*’

‘Status request.’

‘*Covert.*’

‘Duration?’

‘*As long as possible. Until detected.*’

‘Kill or capture?’

‘*Kill. And eradicate all trace.*’

‘Confirmed. Request data inload.’

It took a few seconds. A small beacon lit up on the hololithic render.

‘Deeper than I thought,’ Tagiomalchian murmured, not intending to be heard, but the baffle also focused vox-audio to the listener.

‘*It’s a warren, Tagiomalchian, and there are rats lurking within.*’

‘Then I had best start digging.’

Sump harvesters plied the chemical soup coagulating at the edge of the Swathe. Their nets and hooks dragged and snapped for salvage. Smoking ragsticks, coughing up their cancer-ridden lungs, slowly dying from the toxins in their blood, they gave no heed to the golden warrior striding in their midst. They didn’t even blink.

Gairok was a heavy burden, and it took several hours to reach the arena. As I neared the outskirts, I saw the smoke. Tarrigata’s hab was in flames. Laying down Gairok’s body, I drew my sword and ran. I thought it might be the work of Radik Clev, retaliation for what I had done to his chrono-gladiator. Upon entering the shanty town, I knew it wasn’t revenge. Madness reigned here. I found the dead. Eviscerated, beheaded and dismembered, they littered the place, ripped up like a butcher’s leavings.

A pressure began to build behind my temples and I pressed a hand to my head to ward it off. Pain, like a fathomless dive into a deep ocean, threatened to put me down, but I resisted. I smelled smoke, from Tarrigata’s hab, from the Abyssna, and struggled to tell which was real and which was not.

A chill pricked my face, but I knew the atmosphere in the Swathe was sweltering. I remembered the Sibir ice plain and dared not look up for fear of seeing the atomics falling again. Then I was at Ararat, bellowing with Arik Tyrannis as he raised the Lightning Banner.

And then Hy Brasil and Ursh and Albia.

My skull throbbed. The dreams of Unity were relentless, and I powerless to command them.

In the end I focused on my sword, and held it tight across my body, thinking of its solidity, its permanence, its reality.

I resurfaced from the dream, sweating, skin burning with fever. I was on my knees, a watery pool of sick in front of me. I spat the taste of it from my mouth and hurried to Tarrigata's hab. As I kicked down the door, heat and smoke assailed me. I hadn't seen Vezulah during the frantic rush through the shanty and wondered if I would find him within, blood-mad like Gairok had been. I plunged inside, holding my breath and warding my face with my forearm.

A few of the shelves had collapsed, either in the heat or during some struggle that had preceded this mess. I hacked through one, vaulted another until I found Tarrigata on his side, choking from smoke inhalation.

He turned his head at my approach. Fear contorted his face. He cried out, a pathetic, plaintive sound, as I swept in and gathered up his frail body into my arms. Thin fingers raked at my skin like needles. He fought, but with the strength of an enfeebled child.

'Be still,' I warned him, 'or we'll both die in this shithole.'

His struggles eased, either at the sound of my voice or because he had used up what fight he had left. The fire was rising, spreading across the walls and ceiling. It crawled like a mudslide, hungrily devouring everything it touched. I heard shattering glass and realised the flasks were slowly cooking off. The chemical mixtures within would act as an accelerant.

Cradling Tarrigata against my body, I smashed headlong through the back of the hab and kicked through the rear door to emerge on the other side. We had barely made it two metres when the old shack and furnace exploded, sending up a plume of fiery debris and smoke into the air.

No crowd had gathered. Everyone was either dead or in hiding.

I carried Tarrigata clear and set him down on an old, threadbare chair. Its arms were missing and patches of the synth-leather had flaked away to reveal mildewed sponge beneath. His breath rattled, and his skin looked so pallid that I knew he didn't have long.

'Where is Vezulah?' I asked him firmly.

The old man's head lolled to the side and I gently grasped it by the chin, turning it to face me.

'Tarrigata, you're dying. I'm sorry. But I need to know.'

Sudden urgency gripped him and he lurched towards me, mouth working but the words struggling to come at first. I leaned in, so the old man could whisper his truth into my ear.

'He's… he's coming.'

Then he slumped back, sagging like a deflated lung and stirred no more.

‘He’s not. Vez is gone.’

I looked down and saw he had pressed the rad pistol into my hands. I didn’t know if he meant for me to use it on myself or Vezulah, but I took it and put it in the empty holster attached to my weapons belt.

I tore a strip of cloth from under my armour to wrap around Tarrigata’s eyeless sockets. Tying the blindfold in place, I took a deep breath and laid my hand upon his forehead.

‘You old bastard, you tried to stop him didn’t you?’

Standing, I looked down on Tarrigata’s withered body. Death had diminished him.

‘That’s my burden now. I’ll stop him. I’ll end it.’

Tagiomalchian swept unseen through the narrow alleyways and tunnels of the Swathe. He moved swiftly, the locator beacon flashing in his retinal lens growing closer with every second. In the distance, black smoke plumed into the sky, casting a funerary pall.

He found the first real evidence of his quarry at a dive bar that had been transformed into a charnel house. The heady stench of low-grade alc-grain and cooled viscera invaded his nostrils. He let it. As an Ephroi he had been trained to seek out evidence. He smelled transhuman blood, then engaged the internal vox.

‘Could be Legion,’ he said, ‘those who escaped the purge.’

‘*Proceed with caution.*’

Tagiomalchian nodded to himself. He knelt down to turn over one of the ragged bodies. His eyes drew to slits behind his retinal lenses.

‘That’s interesting…’ It looked like a burn mark in the shape of–

A nagging sense of wrongness made Tagiomalchian turn. He had barely reached for his sword when he was smashed off his feet.

I followed the trail Vezulah had left. It wasn’t hard, and I wondered if in some part of his still-lucid mind he wanted me to find him. To end him. I hoped I could; I hoped I could stave off the madness that had turned Gairok and Vezulah too.

I thought of Tarrigata, of the old man choking half to death as he fled for his life. I could not reconcile with Vezulah being responsible for that. Even drifting as he often did, Vezulah would not have raised a hand to the old man. But perhaps he didn’t know. The dreams, I had felt them. Vivid, persuasive. The desire for past glory was an effective blindfold.

I ran through the Swathe, getting fearful looks from its inhabitants. The dregs lingered here in the deeps and they wanted to be left alone in misery and squalor. Some brandished weapons, ready to defend their sorry lives, but they were empty threats. Others took refuge in their hovels, hunkering down and shutting their eyes, as if waiting for a storm to pass.

In an ancient part of the district, I found a Legion mark carved into a stone stairwell. The old lightning bolt led me downwards into a catacomb. I knew this place. It was called the Flood, the deepest part of the Swathe. Ancient columns streaked with grime rose up to a curved and vaulted ceiling. It had been beautiful once, but as with so many things age had stolen its glory. Parts of the Flood had collapsed, surrendering to the agglomerated weight of the levels above. I clambered over a sloping heap of debris, slewed across my path like a bulging sack had split its stitches and spewed into the main thoroughfare, its contents left to sit where they may. I seldom came here. I had no cause, but wondered what Vezulah's might be.

'Is this our last battlefield, brother?' I asked of the dark, and was surprised when it answered.

'I have fought my last battle already, Dah.'

I found him leaning against the curved catacomb wall, a hand across his stomach holding everything in. Something wet and dark gleamed between Vezulah's trembling fingers. His broken axe lay next to his body, the blade acid-burned in two.

'Vez…' I knelt down beside him. He looked deathly in the flickering glow of the overhead phosphor lamps.

'Are you armed?' he rasped.

I frowned, about to gesture to my drawn sword and the broad-blade strapped to my back when I realised Vezulah was blind. A milky sheen covered his eyes, and there were burn marks around the sockets and across his face.

'Acid…' he said, correctly assuming the reason for my silence. 'Forgot they could do that.' He laughed, but the effort cost him. 'He gave them all the gifts, didn't He. And left us to fester and rot.' He reached out and grabbed my arm, fumbling with his blindness. 'We should not have lasted this long.'

I held his head to the light, trying to examine the ghastly injuries to his face. He resisted, as if ashamed of his condition.

‘The gut wound is fatal,’ he hissed, teeth clenched with a sudden flare of pain.

‘Who did this?’ I asked, and let him go. I peered into the darkness but found no attackers lurking.

‘They were among us, Dah,’ he said. ‘Hiding in the Swathe. I fought them. They ran and led me here. Left me to die.’ He grimaced, and I felt the pull of Vezulah’s mortal thread growing taut.

‘Who, brother? Who hid from us?’

‘A mark, red-raw, like a brand…’ He pointed to his left cheek, his finger lathered in blood. ‘They said his name. Said…’

I grabbed his armoured collar, and wrenched him to me.

‘Tell me, brother! Let me avenge you.’

‘Said… he is coming.’

Vezulah let out a long, shuddering breath, and it was over.

I had been wrong. Vezulah hadn’t slaughtered the settlement or left Tarrigata to die. But someone had.

Head bowed, I shut my eyes and felt the heft of the rad pistol against my leg. I considered drawing it. My fingers closed around the grip. A single shot, if it could still fire. Left temple.

I opened my eyes and let the pistol go.

‘For Unity…’ I muttered, and laid my Legion ring in Vezulah’s lap.

‘The enemy within.’ A mark, a name. That’s what Vezulah had said. I had heard stories, most of them from Tarrigata. War was coming. Some said it had already arrived, that traitors were among us.

At the faint clash of steel I looked up.

I got to my feet and ran through the catacombs, chasing the sounds of battle.

Tagiomalchian limped into the catacombs, ignoring the pain beneath his cracked auramite armour. A shredded falsehood lay somewhere in his wake. The cloak had proven ineffective against his quarry, which had sensed him by unnatural means. Its blood, or what passed for blood, slicked the edge of his sentinel blade. The weapon weighed heavy in his grasp. So did the shield on his back, and he knew that the creature had hurt him. But he had also hurt it.

‘Mark my location,’ he said into the vox.

‘*You sound injured.*’

Tagiomalchian gritted his teeth. ‘Mark it.’

A brief pause suggested another enquiry was coming, but in the end it didn’t materialise. Instead, a different interrogative.

‘*Are you close, Tagiomalchian?*’

‘I am.’

‘*Is it them?*’

Few knew of the attack on the Throneworld by the Alpha Legion. In the end it had been contained and the immediate threat neutralised. Concerns remained. There had been ‘incidents’. One at the Plaintive Reach watch station had been difficult to suppress. Rumours had leaked out into the districts. Madness swept throughout Terra. The Warmaster was coming. Sympathisers had sprung up in the populace. Cults. A purge had been ordered, a cleansing fire in the face of the oncoming corruption.

The harbingers of that corruption stood before Tagiomalchian.

‘It’s them,’ he said, and shut off the vox.

Tagiomalchian had emerged into the flickering light of a subterranean hall. The tunnels had led him here. An icy chill touched him even through his armour. The hall’s original purpose had been obscured by time and invention. An old bathhouse, perhaps, its rusted copper pipes still visible but only partially intact. A pair of handle-driven pumps shaped into the mouths of heraldic *gryphonnes* fed a deep basin, but were seized in place by decay. Flaking filigree spoke of mythic seaborne beasts, but those artistic images had been perverted.

Something more ancient and primal stood in this place now. Torches burned eagerly in iron sconces, letting off a cloying scent of fouled meat and sour milk. A rimy scum of blood, not water, ringed the edge of the basin where a symbol had been crudely drawn in a tarry black substance. Candles guttered, clumped like overgrown weeds. Their waxy stems gave off the stink of animal fat.

Tagiomalchian raised his sword. Gilded whorls and ornate intaglio caught the light. A crackle of energy ran up the blade.

A short row of steps led up to the old bathhouse dais. Dark streaks ran down the grimy stone. It waited for him here, as he knew it would be waiting ever since it had tasted his blood. A ragged black cloak sat around its armoured shoulders, draped over scaled war-plate the colour of forgotten seas. Strange, organic spines poked through its sackcloth mantle. It needed no weapons. Its fingers ended in long talons that had tasted Tagiomalchian’s

blood. It had been a legionary once, but now something else had taken residence in the mortal flesh it wore.

‘Abomination,’ declared Tagiomalchian, unhurried as he climbed the steps and so calm he could have been commenting on the weather. His gaze stayed on the legionary, but he was also aware of the robed figures by its side. Eight men and women. Though they were hooded, and stood over several bodies in the basin. Partly clotted blood rimed the drainage grate, clinging to the metal and darkening the rust at the edges.

The robed figures each bore the brand of the hydra on their cheek, so did the dead. Willing sacrifices. Each mark looked freshly made and raw, just like the one Tagiomalchian had seen in the dive bar before he had been attacked.

A ritual circle had been drawn in the black tar. He was to be sacrificed. The Emperor’s blood flowed in his veins, potent and preternatural. That had meaning for these depraved creatures and the thing they served.

Amongst the robed supplicants, a demagogue stepped forwards.

‘He is coming,’ the woman uttered, without zeal, as if she were simply speaking a fact.

‘Lupercal,’ the rest replied.

‘Lupercal,’ the cultists chimed as one.

‘Lupercal,’ echoed the legionary. He spoke in two voices in opposite registers. Then he leapt at Tagiomalchian.

I heard the crash of metal hitting stone, the sound of an armoured body borne down by something bigger and heavier. Flickering torchlight beckoned at the tunnel edge and the hint of a larger chamber began to come into being.

I smelled the ice plains again, heard the wind and fought to keep the old dreams at bay. Whatever had had its way in the Swathe, had killed Vezulah and led to Tarrigata’s death was here. I alone could reckon that debt and avenge the dead.

The rad pistol slapped at my thigh as I ran. The broad-blade felt leaden in my grasp, old muscles protesting even before this last battle. I ignored the pain and activated the disruptor. It flared then failed. I tried again, still running, about to break through an archway and into the light. It flickered and held. The actinic crackle running along the blade tanged my mouth, as though an electric current had just been laid across my tongue.

I breached the cordon of light and saw a golden warrior on his back, and a thing that defied understanding hacking at him with dagger-length talons. I

knew the warrior, if not by name. A Custodian of the Emperor. I had fought beside them during the wars for Unity.

He half turned at my approach, expecting another enemy, but powerless to do anything about it if I was. His faceplate was impassive, but his struggle was far more obvious. The beast, the part-legionary, part-mutant that thrashed at the Custodian paid me no heed at all.

The eight figures on the bloody dais above them did and turned at once, opening their robes to reveal long, curved blades. Cultists.

Tarrigata, you old bastard. You were right after all…

Howling madness, they came at me.

I gutted the first, impaling him on the end of my sword. The disruptor field blew the body apart. Skin, bone and organs evaporated. The others seemed undeterred despite the spattering of gore. As I hacked the arm off one, I felt a blade cut into my bicep. It went deep and I stifled a growl of pain. Never show your weakness – the arena had taught me that. Another blade bit into my back. Now I roared. They had me surrounded. I felt the dreams of Unity pull at my mind. If I drifted now, I died, and so did the Custodian. Weakened, he struggled to fight back. The beast gored at him like prey it had brought down from the hunt. A few more minutes and it would be over.

I swung my arm, feeling a solid hit and the sharp crack of bone as one of the cultists flew like a broken spear haft and crashed somewhere out of my immediate sight. Holding the broad-blade one-handed, I drew my short sword and staked another into the ground. Despite his mania, the wretch began to wail.

I finished off the partly dismembered cultist next, my skull splitting hers open like an egg. A wild slash of my broad-blade brought death to another, a disembowelling blow that sluiced the ground with his guts. Stamping on the one I had staked a moment before left two still standing.

The first rushed me, curved blade swinging. I extended a savage kick into his torso, hard enough to penetrate the ribcage and snap through the spine. My boot came through his back and I had to shake off the ragged corpse. The last, the leader I think, slit her throat rather than face me, her body falling off the dais and into the empty basin to join the other bodies below.

Now the beast turned and in its gaze I saw something fathomless and evil. And I knew, in my marrow, it was no beast. At least, not of the natural order.

All the stories I had heard, of the darkness coming to Terra, of the pacts made with beings older than the Imperium, I believed them.

Evil was amongst us, defying the Emperor's rule of order. And I served the Emperor. I always have. I always will. It is my oath. It is the thunder and the lightning.

It threw the Custodian aside, casting him off like tough meat forgotten in preference of a sweeter kill. I brandished my sword.

'For Unity!' I roared.

We charged at each other, man against beast.

It struck like a tank, smashing me off my feet. My sword had barely cut a groove in armour that resembled arachnid carapace only many times more robust.

I staggered up, sword as heavy as a tombstone, skull pounding.

The Sibir ice plain…

Smoke drifting from the Abyssna…

Shaking off the dreams, I scarcely parried a slashing talon. It had prodigious strength, the repelled blow nearly jolted loose my shoulder, but its presence felt… *wrong*. A deeper malaise, more than just physical pain, began to wear at me. Old voices of the dead, visions of carnage yet to come. My own ignominious death, sacrificed to some entity from beyond…

I cried out, and realised its talons ripped at my flesh, taking a butcher's fill. I swung, cutting off a hand or a claw. The appendage flopped to the ground, flipped from back to front and then scuttled, spider-like into the shadows.

Such horrors, I had barely seen the like.

I backed away and knew I was dying, not from the wasting of my limbs and mind, but from the wound it had dealt. I felt it. I *knew* it.

I barely had the strength remaining to lift my sword. I had dropped the other blade. It had scattered away into the same shadows where the spider-hand had sought refuge.

I slashed wildly, trying to hold off the beast. It laughed at my efforts, its voice inhuman enough to set the hairs on the back of my neck on end. Then I reached down, out of instinct or by design I could not be certain, and felt the grip of the rad pistol. The mark of Unity pressed against the palm of my hand as I wrenched it loose of the holster, not knowing if it would even fire.

I clenched the trigger.

A focused burst of intense radiation struck the beast in its torso. The mortal shell it wore shuddered. It sagged, momentarily weakened. In that moment I swung the broad-blade with every ounce of my strength and cleaved through shoulder, through torso, through neck. It should have been dead, but instead it mewled and staggered, its plaintive wailing enough to set my teeth on edge.

Then I fell, unable to stand any longer and felt the depth of my failure.

‘For Unity,’ I spat, blood lacing my phlegm.

‘For Unity,’ said the Custodian, risen up behind it, his great golden blade splitting the beast’s head in two.

A second thrust of that perfect sword pierced where the heart should be, the beast now prostrate on the ground. A shriek tore from its mouth grille, a ghastly and inhuman sound. Tarry smoke issued from the joins in its armour like a guttering candle starved of air.

‘Is it dead?’ I asked, sunk to my knees and leaning heavily on the pommel of my sword.

The Custodian looked at me and I felt the weighing of judgement in his wary gaze. At length, he nodded.

‘In a manner of speaking, yes. You have my thanks…’

‘Heruk,’ I said, recognising the pause as an invitation, ‘Dahren Heruk.’

‘Thunder Legion?’

It was my turn to nod.

‘I thought your kind were all dead.’

‘We are. Near enough.’

‘Tagiomalchian. I am in your debt, Dahren Heruk. Terra is in your debt.’

‘Then I have one favour to ask of you,’ I said, raising my hand to stop Tagiomalchian from sheathing his sword.

He looked at me, that impassive mask as unreadable as a statue, but then I saw the slightest nod.

As the grip of mortality closed about me, I felt the dream. Smell and taste at first, but then I began to hear the cheers of victory as the Lightning Banner was lifted into the sky. I stood upon the slopes of Mount Ararat, Kabe and Gairok and Vezulah at my side.

Reality grew fleeting though I heard the soft clank of Tagiomalchian’s armour as he came to stand behind me, and the scrape of his blade as he brought it aloft.

‘Give me the honoured death,’ I said, and the cheers rose louder.

Unity! Unity! Unity!
I closed my eyes as tears of joy flowed down my face, and whispered.
‘For Unity…’
And heard the blade fall.

THE BOARD IS SET

Gav Thorpe

‘The Wolves will be here soon.’

Eirich Halferphess, Astrotelegraphica Exulta, frowned at Malcador’s statement, his yellowed skin creasing like a discarded rag.

‘We detect no approach of the Rout. Have you had word from Russ?’

‘I misspoke,’ said Malcador, bowing his head in apology as he leaned his staff against the broad battlement, crossed his arms and looked out across the vista of fortifications and warriors. ‘I was referring to the Luna Wolves.’

‘You mean the Sons of Horus,’ said his companion, the co-head of the Higher Tower of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.

‘That lacks any poetry.’

The astropath grunted and shrugged.

‘You are right. The traitor fleet is days, perhaps hours away from arrival,’ he said.

They stood atop the pinnacle where Eirich and his cohort of soul-bound psykers delved into the mysteries of the warp and rode the light of the Astronomican to send and receive messages from distant worlds. Just as astronomers used to place their observatories on high points to escape the miasma of light pollution, so the astrotelepaths gathered in the Higher Tower far from the psychic shields that emanated from the Imperial Dungeon in the heart of the Emperor’s fortified domain.

‘There is a cacophony that comes with them,’ continued Eirich. Stubble marked his chin and cheeks, when usually he was meticulously clean-shaven. His green robe was a little dishevelled also, telling a tale of tension, sleeplessness and constant activity that was continued in the red rims of his eyes. ‘At first we thought it was simply backwash, warp static. There are dozens of ships, after all.’

‘Hundreds,’ Malcador quietly corrected. ‘Thousands, perhaps.’

‘Indeed.’ Eirich coughed nervously, another recent tic he had developed, along with fingers fidgeting at his rope belt. Malcador absorbed it all without comment, but the strain of seeking the traitors in the warp had taken a heavy toll on all of the warp-scryers under the Sigillite’s demesne. ‘But it is not warpwash. It is the empyrean itself, a psychic resonance that travels *with* the traitors, not caused by them.’

‘What’s the business, that such a hideous trumpet calls to parley the sleepers of the house? Speak, speak!’

Eirich scowled in confusion at the Emperor’s Regent. Malcador sighed. ‘Great alarums. The heralds lift their clarions to their lips and announce the arrival of their treacherous lord.’

‘What heralds? Now is no time to speak in your mysteries and riddles, Sigillite.’

‘It does not matter,’ said Malcador, dismissing himself and Eirich’s concerns with a waved hand. He took up his staff and gazed at the Astrotelegraphica Exulta, measuring his mettle. ‘Cease your deep watch. There is no more to be learnt in this way and your people must have rest. There will be even greater challenges in the days to come.’

‘But what of Horus?’

‘He is coming. We can neither turn aside his course nor stall his arrival. Better to be strong to receive him in the right fashion, yes?’ Malcador turned and headed along the rampart back towards the tower. His next words were for himself. ‘And when he arrives, there is not a living soul on Terra that will not know it.’

For nearly seven years a labour force of more than a billion souls had worked beneath the tireless genius of Rogal Dorn, building the most daunting fortress in the history of humanity. And yet as Malcador traversed the Imperial Palace, heading deep towards the Imperial Dungeon, the activity was as noticeable as the day it had begun.

The Praetorian took nothing for granted. Even now, on the very cusp of the greatest battle for mankind’s survival, he left nothing to chance. Thousands thronged the passageways moving supplies to just the right batteries and storehouses, or deployed cannons and blades to guardhouses as Dorn finessed some arc of fire or incorporated the last dregs of industry from foundries that would soon fall cold.

Malcador was more sanguine, although far from complacent. As he had told Halferphess, events had been set in motion that would not be steered by the placement of forty more shells in the rightmost tower of Gate Forty-Two in the Lower Maiyla Periphery.

The Sigillite had once read a theory that the tiniest of acts could have profound, devastating consequences; that stepping on a beetle in Chuzu could somehow precipitate a chain reaction that led to hurricanes devastating the Floridal Isles. The theory had been expounded upon at great length with many mathematical symbols and equations. Yet that was before knowledge of the warp had become widespread. The warp – and the beings within it –

cared nothing for causality. They shaped fate on a far grander scale. Destiny was as malleable to their manipulation as the flesh of their followers.

The future of the Imperium would be decided here, within these walls, but not by weight of fire or placement of big guns. Yes, those things would shape the nature of the confrontation that had to happen, the grotesque bloodshed, the price that had to be paid to bring matters to their head.

The warp heralds had it right. Their psychic clarions were not just an announcement, they were a challenge from the darkness itself. ‘Here is our champion,’ they cried. ‘Kneel before him or perish!’

Not Dorn nor Vulkan, Sanguinius nor Jaghatai would beat Horus, not now that his ascension was almost complete. Together? Perhaps. But Horus, for all the weakness in his soul now exposed, was not a fool. He had always demonstrated the ability to set the field to his need, making victory look easy. The challenge was for one alone, the one that made him.

The thought agitated Malcador. Ever since the collapse of the webway endeavour, his hopes for mankind had been eroded. There was only one who could defeat Horus, and only one who Horus wanted to defeat.

And Horus had never picked a fight he could not win.

Shoulders hunched, jaw clenched, Malcador sped his descent, a clammy fist of foreboding gripping his heart.

The door opened at the approach of the Sigillite, ancient wood swinging open to reveal a small antechamber, not far from the far grander entrance to the Imperial Dungeon. The timbers closed quietly behind him as he stepped over the threshold and waved a hand, brands springing into flaming life in the sconces around the walls.

The plaster was cracked in places, the mural that had been on them little more than a memory of faded colour. The tiles of the mosaic floor were similarly indecipherable, worn almost smooth and colourless by generations of passage across them.

There were no other doors and the only furniture was two high-backed chairs facing each other across a circular table. Upon the table was an octagonal board of granite and pale marble beside a light wooden box, and upon the geometric spaces were set twenty playing pieces.

Malcador placed his staff against the back of the chair, sat down and regarded the game pieces thoughtfully. They were all plain, spindle-like shapes at present, of lifeless grey. On one side of the table waited a deck of

thin crystalline wafers, the back of each marked with the Sigillite's rune. He picked up the top card but it was blank, as he knew it would be.

Malcador put the cards back and as he raised his eyes they came upon a figure seated opposite. He was tall, the hood of a scarlet cape about his shoulders. His expression was stern but not cruel, utterly unremarkable but for the potency in his eyes. His hair was dark, pulled back in a short scalp-lock. In the flicker of torchlight the skin might have been suede, tough and worn by a long and uncaring life, but not a line of age marked it – in stark contrast to Malcador's own weathered and withered flesh.

It reminded Malcador of an ancient tale of a cursed portrait, but before he could say anything his companion spoke.

'Would you like to be Warmaster?' asked Revelation.

Malcador arranged the red pieces before him, but his opponent shook His head before He was finished.

'No, we start at the beginning,' He said. A calloused hand started placing the pieces in the spaces at the centre of the board, forming a cluster around a rectangular gap the same size as the crystal cards. When all was arranged, the pieces shifted colour, turning a deep blue.

Malcador picked up the cards and shuffled them.

'Why do you do that? They are all blank for the moment.'

'Habit,' Malcador admitted with a chuckle. He continued all the same, sliding the cards into each other with deft fingers before riffling them together with a flourish. One of many inconsequential skills he had taught himself over a long life that had, until relatively recently, been mostly spent in isolation.

He laid the cards into the slot and then studied the board, elbows on the hard table.

'Like the cards, they are all the same,' remarked Revelation. 'It does not matter which you pick.'

'It should,' grumbled Malcador. 'It feels like it should. Every decision has consequences.'

'Yes, but you have already chosen – you simply need to admit that to yourself.'

With a grunt, Malcador laid his finger on the sculpted tip of the piece closest to him – the same as he always did whenever they played from the outset. At his touch the surface of the piece rippled, becoming a figurine. It was rendered abstractly, so that the arms and legs ended in smooth nubs

rather than hands and feet, giving the figure no front or back. Only the face possessed any detail. Faces, in fact, one looking in each direction.

The Twins, it was called.

The Sigillite lifted the top card with thin fingers and turned it over. Colour swirled across the psycho-reactive crystal, coalescing into the many-headed Hydra.

‘All places and none,’ said Malcador. He set the piece in the home squares directly in front of him.

Revelation touched a piece, and under His attention it transformed into a raven sat upon a broken skull, talons digging into the bone. The revealed card turned black and Revelation moved His piece to one side also.

‘The shadows conceal,’ He announced with a grim expression.

In Malcador’s fingers the next card was a glossy red like fresh blood. He set a piece in one corner where it became a warrior, scarred and down on one knee. ‘The King of Nothing.’

A hooded assassin, cloaked in tatters, and a card of a blindfolded spectre. ‘The Blind Darkness.’

‘The Hawk Soars.’

‘Lord of the Clouds.’

‘The Chosen.’

They continued, activating each piece in turn, scattering them to their true starting positions as dictated by the cards. When all was arranged, ten figurines each, the game began in earnest. Having adopted the part of Warmaster, Malcador’s was the first turn. He hesitated, fingers hovering over the piece that had become the Lord of Hearts, a noble figure clad in armour, held aloft on the shoulders of two companions.

‘What has occurred cannot be changed,’ he announced. ‘We have played it out a hundred times.’

‘Humour me.’

‘The traitors are on their way. They will be in the Solar System before we finish. We do not have time.’

Revelation sat back, hands folded in His lap.

‘Then why did you come?’ He asked. ‘Am I to be a distraction from your woes?’

‘I wish to find answers, as ever,’ said Malcador. ‘I seek your wisdom, your insight.’

‘Why?’

It was such an unexpected question that the Regent had no reply for a short while.

‘I…’ He looked into the inscrutable expression of his lord and wondered if He already knew the answer. Revelation sat impassive, the embodiment of patience. Malcador swallowed hard, confession welling up inside. ‘I am afraid.’

He picked up the Lord of Hearts. The figure seemed so noble.

‘It does not start with that piece,’ said Revelation. ‘What is the cause of your fear?’

This time the answer came swiftly and easily.

‘Failing you,’ said the Sigillite.

‘Not death?’

‘If I am dead, I am beyond regret. To live with failure would be a torment.’

‘Would it reassure you to know that if you fail to defeat Horus your regret will be short-lived? One might even say fleeting.’

‘An instant or an eternity makes no difference.’

‘Play,’ insisted the Lord of Terra.

Malcador replaced the Lord of Hearts and his fingers moved to the Chosen. He slid it next to the Lord of Hearts. He revealed a card, a golden-haloed eye. ‘Awakening,’ muttered the Sigillite. Both pieces turned red as he set the card to one side.

Revelation moved the Hydra back to the centre and took a card. An ancient set of scales, in perfect balance. ‘Division,’ He announced. The Twins piece became two, each identical. Without hesitation He set one before Malcador and the other in front of Himself.

The Sigillite tried to move the Perfection to safety – represented by an immaculate-looking diamond – but Revelation played ‘Ambition’ and a tiny but ugly flaw appeared in the depth of the gem.

‘You always cheat,’ said the Regent. ‘You control the cards and I do not.’

‘Do I?’ Revelation did not seem amused. ‘Or does it simply seem that I do?’

‘They are attuned to you and you alone,’ said Malcador. ‘Who else would make them change?’

‘Perhaps it is because you only see them that way. It could be your interpretation that is repetitive. Or maybe the game is rigged against you, as you claim. If that were the case, why do you insist in playing me?’

‘Because you have never yet shown me the final play. You always end the game before a victor has been decided.’ Malcador cleared his throat. ‘We have run out of time. If you have a plan, it is now that you must reveal it.’

‘What if I told you that I did not know how to win?’

‘You are more powerful than Horus, even now.’

‘That is not what I said. Sometimes I play the game as Warmaster and you are the Emperor. It does not change the game.’

Frustrated, Malcador snatched up the Perfection and used it to sweep aside the Iron General. The opposing piece tumbled, the head crowned with sunbeams rolling across the board.

‘Clumsy,’ said Revelation. He picked up the two transmorphic pieces and set them back in the wooden box beside the board. ‘Perhaps I will fix that later when I have some time.’

The Regent’s card was the Great Tempest. In a flurry of moves, his pieces cut a line through his opponent’s, separating them into three enclaves. The Chosen, aided by Grand Visions, and the King of Nothing moved pincer-like on the Uncrowned Monarch while the Blind Darkness pinned the Double-Edged Blade into one corner of the board. Revelation removed the Angel from harm’s way but Malcador played Temptation upon it, sliding the card beneath the piece so that it was held in stasis.

Several of Revelation’s pieces were now surrounded, with only one avenue of escape. Malcador indicated an angle from Revelation’s home spaces, where the Invincible Bastion was held in reserve, having been returned there in the opening turns.

‘I do not understand why you never play that move.’ The Regent pointed to a position behind the Lord of Hearts that would see his capital piece trapped against its own companions.

‘I shall indulge you, this time,’ said Revelation as He moved the Invincible Bastion up to the Lord of Hearts. He nodded for Malcador to turn the next card. He took the sliver of crystal and turned it over. The face clouded, turned into a bluish-green and then resolved into the shape of a Hydra. At the same time, both of the Twins turned red, joining the Warmaster. Immediately Malcador saw that he could move one of them into the space that had been occupied by the Invincible Bastion, forcing a capitulation.

‘Now you cheat on my behalf!’ Malcador’s indignity raised the briefest of smiles from Revelation.

‘Whatever made you think there was only one Hydra card?’ He picked up the next four and fanned them towards His regent, each of them showing the same design of the many-headed dragon.

Before Malcador could make the move Revelation quickly reset the board to its previous layout.

‘But that is not my play,’ He declared, slipping the Shadow from where it was being encircled.

‘You have abandoned the Anvil,’ pointed out Malcador, gesturing to the lone figure left amid a handful of his pieces.

‘Yes, but you know what happens next.’

With a sigh, Malcador played the only move available to him, bringing the Blind Darkness back into play to remove the Anvil. He took the piece off the table as Revelation flipped over the next crystalline wafer, showing the Return. Revelation reached into the game box – a box Malcador knew to be empty – and placed a fresh Anvil piece on the board. Eyes fixed on the Sigillite, Revelation slipped the Return back into the deck and, contrary to his earlier barb, shuffled the pack.

Sighing again, Malcador considered his next move, as if Revelation would leave him any choice.

The game continued as it had done each time before. Malcador tried to vary the course of his moves, to capture pieces previously denied him, but a turn of a card or a cunning play by Revelation always set the pieces back into the positions they had occupied many times previously.

Revelation tried to push the Library into Malcador’s home squares, forcing him to play Misdirection and Falling Blade together, temporarily taking control of the Hungering Wolf to intercept the move. On the other side of the board the Angel, Uncrowned Monarch and Double-Edged Blade routed the Chosen and the King of Nothing. Some delaying moves by Revelation with the Blind Darkness caused temporary havoc until the piece was captured. In the meantime, the centre of the board had been all but swept clear of pieces and cards. Only the Shadow roamed free, its power much curtailed with the attachment of ‘Doubt’ shortly after its escape from the early offensive.

Occasionally it seemed as though Revelation played to lose, His positioning making Him vulnerable for a short time before it was revealed that move by move Malcador became encircled until he had no option left but to attack directly, initiating the second phase of the game.

There was no choice but to act aggressively now. Though the Warmaster held the numerical and positional advantage, Revelation held a hand of cards, as yet unplayed; Malcador's current draw were all spent save one. He laid it down on the Lord of the Clouds.

Malcador blinked and checked the card again. It was different from their previous games, depicting not the defiance of the Wall but a maggot eating its way out of a stylised heart.

'Corruption.' The word came to him unbidden and he said it quietly, unsure what to think. He looked up, realising that for some time – hours perhaps – he had been focused wholly on the board. Revelation studied the pieces where before He had been casual, offhand almost.

Going through the motions, thought Malcador. Indulging me.

He was rapt now, eyes moving from one piece to the next, fingertips pushing down into the table, the immaculate fingernails pale against the lacquered wood.

'What has happened?' asked Malcador.

'Play on.' Revelation did not look up.

'The game has changed. Why have you changed it?' Malcador felt a yawning gulf opening up in front of him. It was for answers that he had come, but suddenly he was wary of that knowledge. In truth, he had expected everything that had passed so far – perhaps he had simply been seeking comfort in the familiar exchanges before everything would be thrown into the anarchy of war.

'What does it mean?'

Revelation broke His attention from the pieces and for just a moment Malcador thought he saw a hint of sadness. It was gone in a heartbeat, perhaps had never been there at all, replaced by a flinty glare. Revelation barely moved His lips as He spoke, teeth gritted as His eyes bored into the High Lord of Terra, each word enunciated sharply.

'Play. On.'

Malcador's next moves were half-hearted, playing for time as he tried to assimilate the events of the last few minutes.

'You are not trying hard enough, Warmaster,' said Revelation, eyes flashing with anger. 'If you do not win, you are damned.'

The Regent paled, not sure whether his master referred to him literally or in his adopted role. He was never sure how much Revelation really knew, or had known, of the events that had spiralled since Horus had stepped from the

path of loyalty. He had the maddening ability to appear both informed and enigmatic in equal measure, but at that moment the affectation – if it could be called such a thing – did not irritate Malcador as before, but terrified him. His gut shrivelled at the notion that Revelation was moving into uncharted waters as ignorant of the outcome as the rest of them.

He had thought the game would be a way for the embattled Emperor to impart His plan for the defence of Terra and, ultimately, the defeat of Horus. It had not been the first time Malcador had received guidance through the cards, allowing his master to contact him whilst remaining focused on His task upon the Golden Throne. Now the Regent watched the immortal ruler of humanity intently studying each move and realised that the game might well be the means by which Revelation would devise His strategy.

As Warmaster he had to test Revelation's thinking every bit as much as Horus would challenge it in real life. If he did not…

'I cannot do this,' he said, straightening as he pulled his hands back from the board.

'What would you give for me?' asked Revelation, once more laying His hands in His lap, His attention focused on the Sigillite.

'My life.'

'You have already given that.'

'My death, if you wish to be pedantic.'

'What of your soul?'

'You say that no such thing exists.'

'We are short on time, allow me a little metaphysical shorthand. What is your soul worth to you?'

'I still do not understand the question.' Uncomfortable under the scrutiny of his lord, Malcador started to consider the board again. 'I cannot play like Horus – I do not have his mind, his motivations.'

'Then I will assist you.' Revelation reached into the game box and His fingers reappeared holding a new piece, one never seen before. It was shaped like a jester of the most ancient days, complete with gormless expression. Real, tiny cap-bells tinkled as Revelation shook it. 'This is you, Malcador. The Fool. I have used you for millennia to suit my own purposes and before the end I will discard you without a second thought.'

'I know what you are doing,' said Malcador. 'You think to make me angry, like Horus.'

‘You exist only to further my ambitions, a callous on the toe of history and nothing more,’ said Revelation, not making the slightest sign that He had even listened to what Malcador had said. ‘You are just an invisible, nondescript foundation stone in the edifice that will be my undying glory. I have lied to you from the very first moment, and all that you believe of me, of the universe and mankind’s part in it, is fiction. I have manipulated you, abused you and I will toss you away without a single shred of care. One of my legionaries has more consideration for a bolt that he fires than I do for you, Malcador.’

Swallowing hard, the Regent reminded himself of what he had just said – that Revelation was trying to elicit an emotional response.

And yet when he looked into the gaze of Revelation, he saw only implacable, unflinching truth. He had never harboured dreams of glory or even ambitions of temporal power, but Malcador had believed himself valuable. He had taken strength from being counsellor and… advisor to the greatest intellect the human species had ever created? An aid to the most gifted psychic being ever born? Companion to an immortal who had lived a thousand lifetimes?

‘I see that you are starting to understand.’ A hint of a sneer marred Revelation’s expression. He gestured towards the pieces set between them. ‘My sons were taken from me, whispered to during transit to set dark thoughts in their minds. Temptations. Lies. Propaganda. Tell me, Malcador the Sigillite, how many times have you resisted the efforts of our enemy’s lures?’

The Regent did not answer, for the Dark Gods had never attempted to sway him. They had occasionally, and very recently, sought his death, but that was not a distinction he uniquely held.

A brutal, short bark of a laugh made him flinch.

‘You thought yourself too loyal? Your faith in me unshakable? They did not try to recruit you because you have nothing to offer them.’

‘I have created much for you, in your name,’ said Malcador in a wavering tone, searching for clarity. ‘There would be no Imperium without my efforts.’

‘*In my name.*’ Never had three words sounded so scornful. ‘You are a master of tax collectors and clerks. No Imperium without you? No Malcador without the Imperium, you mean. What justification would there be to keep you around without your countless army of bureaucrats to sustain you? Even

my remembrancers – poets and pict-takers – contributed more to the Great Crusade than you did.'

He felt a tear roll down his cheek, his whole body quivering with shame. Malcador looked at Revelation with silent pleading and was rewarded with a contemptuous sigh.

'Some call you my left hand.' Revelation held up the five digits and wiggled them. 'It is true. That is all you have ever been – an extension of my will. I twitch a thought and you act. I care nothing for the hopes and fears of my little finger, and less still for yours.'

Malcador opened his mouth but could think of nothing to say.

'Do not stare at me like some docile ruminant. You said you fear failing me, but the truth is that you know that you already have. You cannot even bring yourself to hate me when I need you to.'

Revelation tossed the playing piece aside. It shattered against the wall. He did not even spare a glance for the discarded fragments.

There was no hint of remorse in His hard stare.

Malcador looked at the splintered pieces of the Fool. Betrayal slid a hot knife in his chest. Its fire spread, enflaming his anger. And one thought burned hotter than any other: that Revelation thought he might care about any of what He had said.

'I have never harboured ambition or sought glory,' growled the Regent, his fingers moving to the King of Nothing. He thrust it directly towards the Angel defending the Emperor's home squares. 'You seek to wound a pride that does not exist. But you think it does, and that is your shame, not mine. It is your pride that will undo us all, not mine.'

He turned the top card. The picture that resolved upon its surface showed a mountain of bodies with a hound at its top, muzzle red with their blood.

'Massacre,' snapped Malcador.

With all semblance of empathy stripped away, Malcador's next moves were swift and direct, happily pairing off his own pieces against Revelation's, sacrificing them if need be. As much as the Regent pushed hard, Revelation dissembled, robbing him of control of his own figurines, diverting them from their planned courses and even matching them against each other with a timely play of 'Internecine Feud'.

Having lost command of the Perfection, Malcador countered with a picture of a weeping mother. 'Unspeakable Suffering,' he announced, shocked by the satisfaction he felt as he pulled away the Warhawk from its

position next to the Invincible Bastion. He *really* wanted to win, to prove the lie of Revelation's affectation of infallibility.

Even so, however strongly he pressed to have an overwhelming advantage in the Emperor's base positions, his opponent always seemed to spare a card to bring another piece into play from elsewhere on the board. Turn by turn a ring of attacking pieces converged around the rear of Malcador's positions: the Hungering Wolf, Uncrowned Monarch and Double-Edged Blade were all poised to strike.

'I win in my next move,' declared Revelation, dropping the 'Salvation' card in front of His Regent. Malcador looked at the portrait writ in the coloured crystal, unmistakably that of Roboute Guilliman.

'A turn too late,' Malcador replied, his expression grim as he realised the meaning of what he was about to do. He whispered the next word as he turned a card depicting a bloodied white feather. 'Sacrifice.'

With shaking fingers he picked up the Angel and removed it from the board, leaving an opening in Revelation's defence. His fingers gripped another piece, about to move it into the space. A piece he had been holding back for just that occurrence. The last to have been given to him, though in reality it was the first Revelation had put into motion.

The Lord of Hearts.

'Wait.'

The single word, softly spoken, stopped Malcador as surely as a roared command. Still with the Lord of Hearts poised to claim victory, the Regent looked up.

Revelation stared at Malcador, seizing him with His dark eyes. The Regent was not sure what he saw in there, aside from tiny reflections of himself, haggard within the shadow of his hood, cheeks glistening with the streak of tears.

'I win…' croaked the Sigillite, but as he returned his attention to the board to place the King of Hearts, there was another piece occupying the space he had to take.

The Fool.

'In ancient days, the Fool could say anything to anyone – in theory, at least,' Revelation said. He smiled and warmth flooded through Malcador to see the expression, but then both the smile and his moment of hope faded. 'It was the Fool's task to remind kings and queens that they were mortal, and weak, and not above any other. In the parlance of a later time they existed to

speak truth to power, to defy authority and, most importantly, puncture tyranny.’

Malcador choked on his next words, not sure what to say. Even at the instant that he collected his thoughts, a distant ripple flushed through his mind. It stank in his nostrils, and brought the thunder of a great storm to his ears, prickling skin and psychic sense alike.

He felt the rift opening, tearing apart reality at the edge of the Solar System. A chorus of infernal clarions screeched across his othersense.

‘The Warmaster has arrived,’ he said, though he knew his opponent could not fail to know also. He looked up but the chair opposite was empty.

‘To whom do you speak, master?’

The voice of Latdava was like a hammer on a pane of glass, shattering the wall of concentration that Malcador had erected around himself. He glared towards the door where the functionary stood, fingers making clumps of her white robe as she stared fearfully at him.

‘How long have you been here?’

‘Several minutes, master,’ the functionary told him. ‘The Astrotelegraphica Exulta sent me with word that the traitor fleet will breach the warp-veil within the hour.’

‘And why do you stare at me like that? What have you seen?’

‘You, master, playing the game by yourself. You turned the cards and moved the pieces with terrible contortions of the features.’ She wrung her robes a little more and her eyes moved to the table. ‘What does it mean?’

Malcador was not sure as he followed her gaze, seeing the pieces arranged at the endgame, the Lord of Hearts still in his hand. Yet where the Fool had been was now another piece, uniquely golden, shaped as a crown.

Beside it lay the last crystal card, its image that of an eagle tearing out the throat of a serpent.

AFTERWORD

We stand at the battlements, staring at the edge of an approaching storm. It's natural to feel nervous, that frisson of fear and excitement that comes with the conclusion of something powerful and momentous. I refer, of course, to the Siege of Terra and the upcoming, epic finale to the Horus Heresy series.

Yes, we're that close.

As of the time of writing, there are just two books remaining (not including this one) until we reach the beginning of the end of a saga that has been over ten years in the telling.

This, *Heralds of the Siege*, is the last anthology before the showdown between the Emperor and Horus, and, you know, the entire galaxy burns.

One thing that sprawling, world-shaping storylines tend to have in common is that they spread out. In relating the sheer scale and galactic stakes, they seek to cover all manner of different events, battles and characters that have greater or lesser roles to play in the final reckoning. The Horus Heresy is no exception to this. It began as a highly focused narrative, seen through the eyes of Loken and rooted primarily with the then Luna Wolves and soon-to-be Sons of Horus Legion. And then it got bigger. We explored other battlefields, other conflicts (of the non-martial variety), characters and storylines. It spread out. As we close, inexorably, on the end, that initial diaspora of ideas has been reined back in, and is being gradually corralled into a narrative cavalry charge pointing to the way to Terra.

This book, then, was really our last chance to gather up some of the disparate tales that were part of the natural narrative expansion. But that's not all it accomplishes. Allow me to explain…

Heralds of the Siege is something of a chimera. In fairly equal parts, it sweeps up the short stories and audio dramas released over the last year or so – tales such as 'Blackshield' by Chris Wraight (which has since helped inspire other Blackshield-related tales, the audio dramas written by Josh Reynolds) and 'The Ember Wolves', by Rob Sanders (which formed part of Black Library's Titans celebration in early 2017) – but it also looks forward

to the two books remaining in the series and the aforementioned conflict between gods that follows.

Several of the stories tie in to major novels, and it's worth pointing these out so you can go back and re-read them in light of the connective short stories, if you'd like to. For the fans of *Cybernetica*, Rob Sanders' second short story, 'Myriad', is a straight-up sequel, and offers us another glimpse of the turmoil surrounding Mars in the wake of the events of Graham McNeill's *Mechanicum*. 'Grey Raven', meanwhile, follows on from *Corax*, specifically the novella 'Weregeld', as Gav Thorpe continues to weave the harrowing saga of the Raven Guard. Guy Haley returns to the murky dealings set afoot in *Pharos* in his short story 'The Painted Count', and last on this particular list is 'The Last Son of Prospero', which features the character Revuel Arvida, who fans will know from *The Path of Heaven*.

As well as the obvious connective tissue to some of the novels, there is also a sense in this book of tying up a few dangling threads. For instance, in 'Children of Sicarus' by Ant Reynolds, we delve as far back as the events of Calth and *Macragge's Honour*, while 'The Soul, Severed' by Chris Wraight returns to the character of Eidolon and the Emperor's Children. 'Dark Compliance' by John French is a fresh character study of Horus, set before the most recent events of the series. All of the above were initially released as audio dramas and are here in prose and print for the first time. So too was 'Valerius', though this one perhaps stands out for a different reason. Written by Gav Thorpe, it features the Imperial hero Marcus Valerius and the Therion Cohort as they are sent to the brutal meatgrinder of Beta-Garmon. Where it differs to the others is that it looks forward to one of the major events we've not yet covered in the series: the Titan Death. But this tale is not alone in its foreshadowing of what lies ahead. Look no further than James Swallow's 'Exocytosis', where he reunites with Typhon and the Death Guard. This, of course, is a minor prelude to the by now infamous events involving the XIV Legion on their way to Terra.

All this talk of looking forward brings me to the final five stories in the collection. They are notable because not only do they all take place on Terra, but they all presage the events of the coming battle for the Throne. Heralds of the Siege, indeed.

The variety across these six stories, the different characters and factions involved, hints at the sheer scope, the awe-inspiring, transhuman dread-invoking scale of the Siege of Terra. From the deep breath before the plunge

in John French’s Dorn-centric story ‘Now Peals Midnight’, to the inner thoughts and strategies of Malcador the Sigillite himself in ‘The Board is Set’, the loyal side of the coming battle is explored. We soar to the very walls of the Imperial Palace with Maximus Thane in Guy Haley’s ‘Duty Waits’, before descending into the urban underbelly and Terra’s murky past with my own ‘Dreams of Unity’, and finally spend some time in the company of the Chief Custodian Constantin Valdor, in Chris Wraight’s ‘Magisterium’.

Each of these last five tales hint at the conflict and the characters to come. Thinking now about the Siege, knowing that, at the time of writing this afterword, the first book is already being written, it’s interesting to reflect on the journey. Once again we begin with a narrative spear tip, before spreading out to encompass the other players in the Siege and their story, only to narrow inevitably to that final, fateful encounter on a little-known ship called the *Vengeful Spirit*…

It’s almost as if we planned it.

Nick Kyme
April 2018

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rob Sanders is the author of the Horus Heresy novellas *Cybernetica* and *The Serpent Beneath*, the latter of which appeared in the *New York Times* bestselling anthology *The Primarchs*. His other Black Library credits include The Beast Arises novels *Predator, Prey* and *Shadow of Ullanor*, the Warhammer 40,000 titles *Sons of the Hydra*, *Skitarius*, *Tech-Priest*, *Legion of the Damned*, *Atlas Infernal* and *Redemption Corps* and the audio drama *The Path Forsaken*. He has also written the Warhammer Archaon duology, *Everchosen* and *Lord of Chaos*, along with many short stories for the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in the city of Lincoln, UK.

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Deliverance Lost*, *Angels of Caliban* and the *Corax* anthology, as well as the novella *The Lion*, which formed part of the *New York Times* bestselling collection *The Primarchs*, and several audio dramas including the bestselling *Raven's Flight*. He has written many novels for Warhammer 40,000, including *Ashes of Prospero*, *Imperator: Wrath of the Omnissiah*, *Rise of the Ynnari: Ghost Warrior*, *Jain Zar: The Storm of Silence* and *Asurmen: Hand of Asuryan*. He also wrote the *Path of the Eldar* and *Legacy of Caliban* trilogies, and two volumes in The Beast Arises series. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Warhammer Chronicles omnibus *The Sundering*, and much more besides. In 2017, Gav won the David Gemmell Legend Award for his Age of Sigmar novel *Warbeast*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the Primarchs novels *Leman Russ: The Great Wolf* and *Jaghatai Khan: Warhawk of Chogoris*, the novellas *Brotherhood of the Storm* and *Wolf King*, and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *The Lords of Silence*, *Vaults of Terra: The Carrion Throne*, *Watchers of the*

Throne: The Emperor's Legion, the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *War of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Warhammer Chronicles novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the *War of Vengeance* series. Chris lives and works in Bradford-on-Avon, in south-west England.

Anthony Reynolds is the author of the Horus Heresy novella *The Purge*, audio drama *Khârn: The Eightfold Path* and short stories 'Scions of the Storm' and 'Dark Heart'. In the Warhammer 40,000 universe, he has written the Space Marine Battles novel *Khârn: Eater of Worlds*, alongside the audio drama *Chosen of Khorne*, also featuring Khârn. He has also penned the Word Bearers trilogy and many short stories. Hailing from Australia, he is currently settled on the west coast of the United States.

James Swallow is best known for being the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Fear to Tread* and *Nemesis*, which both reached the *New York Times* bestseller lists, *The Flight of the Eisenstein* and a series of audio dramas featuring the character Nathaniel Garro. For Warhammer 40,000, he has written four Blood Angels novels, the audio drama *Heart of Rage*, and two Sisters of Battle novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*.

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, the Primarchs novels *Corax: Lord of Shadows*, *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia*, and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dark Imperium, Dark Imperium: Plague War, The Devastation of Baal, Dante, Baneblade, Shadowsword, Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age

of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

John French has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novels *Slaves to Darkness*, *Praetorian of Dorn* and *Tallarn*, the novella *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Dark Compliance*, *Templar* and *Warmaster*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Resurrection* and *Incarnation* for The Horusian Wars, the audio dramas *Agent of the Throne: Blood and Lies*, *Agent of the Throne: Truth and Dreams*, the Ahriman series and many short stories.

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Old Earth*, *Deathfire*, *Vulkan Lives* and *Sons of the Forge*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio dramas *Red-marked* and *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnos*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Warhammer Chronicles novel *The Great Betrayal* and the Age of Sigmar story ‘Borne by the Storm’, included in *War Storm*. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

An extract from *Slaves to Darkness*.

The Sons of Horus bore their father bleeding to his throne. Ghosts followed them, howling from the shadows as the blood shook from their armour. There were four sons: Kibre, the black of his plate glossed with gore; Horus Aximand, his flayed face pale, eyes fixed on the red maw grinning from his Warmaster's side, the armour still rent and smoking; Tormageddon, glittering with ghost-light, silent as smoke; and Maloghurst, who followed them gasping into his breath mask, limping with twisted limbs.

The Justaerin thundered in their wake. Black Terminator armour glinted wetly with blood in the stuttering alarm lights.

'Sire,' called Aximand, grunting the word through the effort of lifting the Warmaster. 'Sire, can you hear us?'

'I…' Horus' mouth was a crack in the pale mask of his face. The fur and velvet of his cloak dragged on the floor, holed and charred, smearing onto the deck in his wake.

Maloghurst tasted warm iron, sulphur and honey through his mask. Horus' head shook. The wound in his side opened wider, the armour crumpling like skin around a sneering mouth.

'Sire!' called Aximand.

A human in the red-and-black robes of a senior bonded officer emerged from a junction as they passed. The bronze data-slate in the man's hands fell to the floor as he knelt, but Maloghurst saw the human's eyes touch the Warmaster before he pressed his forehead to the floor. Maloghurst turned aside and kicked. Pain lanced through his back as the servos in his armour snapped his leg straight. The human flew backwards, his head a crumpled ruin of meat and shattered bone. Maloghurst let out a grunt of discomfort.

'What…' began Aximand.

'He saw!' growled Maloghurst and staggered after the others.

'Justaerin,' called Kibre, his voice booming over the vox as he moved. 'Kill order, command deck, passages ninety-five through two hundred. No survivors!'

The Terminators peeled away. Gunfire echoed down tunnels. Muzzle flare flashed from passage openings as they passed. Screams rose and were silenced.

'The tides shift…' hissed Tormageddon as he loped with fluid grace beneath the Warmaster's weight. ***'He is–'***

'Silence!' shouted Maloghurst, the word shaking with rage. The daemon-vessel hissed in reply.

They reached the throne room. The doors opened at their approach. Starlight and flame diluted the darkness beyond. At the far end, the throne loomed before the open eye of a viewport. They hurried across the dark expanse. Blood scattered to the floor behind them, smoking as it touched air. The bowls of burning oil hanging from the ceiling guttered. Shadows grew in their wake. Ethereal cries rose through the dark as more blood fell to the deck.

‘Seal the doors,’ shouted Maloghurst to the two Justaerin who had followed them. ‘No one enters. No one!’

They set the Warmaster down at the foot of the throne.

‘We must get the Apothecaries,’ said Aximand.

The great chair of basalt and black iron rose above them.

‘This is beyond them,’ snarled Maloghurst.

‘What is happening to him?’ asked Aximand, looking at the still figure of Tormageddon standing a step back from the others. The daemonhost shook its head once slowly.

‘I cannot look at him. The warp is broken edges and crow calls.’

‘We must–’ began Kibre.

‘My… my throne…’ whispered Horus, and for a second his four sons froze. ‘My… father…’

None of them moved. A drop of blood slid from the lips of the wound in the Warmaster’s side and struck the floor as a puff of ash. Kibre turned his head and looked at Maloghurst.

‘Get him to the throne!’ roared Maloghurst. He could feel it now, itching on the edge of his sight and at the back of his eyes. The warp was flowing around them, twisting tight like threads spinning into rope.

Their feet rang on the steps to the throne. Beyond the viewport Maloghurst could see the lights of Beta-Garmon’s star burning like a cooling coal as it fell into the distance. Ice was forming on the crystal panes, spidering across the starlight.

With growls of effort, Horus’ four sons lifted him onto the seat of his throne.

‘Step back,’ hissed Maloghurst.

Blood ran from the Warmaster’s side, pooling and trickling onto the plinth in a black, smoking stream.

For a second nothing else moved. Horus’ eyes were open, but if they saw anything, they fixed on nothing.

‘What–’ began Kibre once more.

A single metal claw scraped on the right arm of the throne. The four sons were utterly still. The flow of blood from the wound had slowed to a dripping ooze. A breath hissed from Horus’ lips. His hand gripped the arm. Blades dug into black stone. Horus raised his head, eyes closing briefly, pale lips opening. His image was flickering, blurring into shadow and out of being.

Maloghurst stepped forwards.

The Warmaster’s eyes opened.

Maloghurst felt the gaze touch him. A wave of heat rolled over him, and for a second he felt his body freeze, felt his flesh blast apart and scatter to the edge of time, felt his soul become a scream stretched to the edge of existence.

The image of the Warmaster shimmered then settled.

‘It is… all right, Mal,’ said Horus.

The four Sons of Horus knelt. The buzzing of their active armour throbbed in the quiet. Maloghurst felt his breath wheeze into his mask and allowed a measure of relief into his thoughts.

Horus took a long, slow breath. The wound in his side had closed. All that remained was a narrow line on his armour, still wet with blood. The low moaning that had itched at the edge of Maloghurst’s awareness quieted.

‘Sire,’ said Aximand, ‘you–’

‘What is our position and strength?’ said Horus. His face was still pale, but the shadows were flowing into the recesses of his face, hardening its lines.

‘The vanguard fleet is with us,’ said Aximand, still watching his primarch unblinkingly. ‘Legion battlefleets Acheron, Styx and Charon remain in-system, along with the vassal groups Bellum, Catullus, Ni-Rho-Delta, Malik, Duterron and Noctis. Engagements continue, but we have dominance. The gate of Beta-Garmon is open.’

‘Yet you pulled the vanguard away?’ said Horus.

‘Sire, you were…’

‘I know, Little Horus,’ said the Warmaster. His eyelids closed briefly. ‘I know. You did well, my sons.’

Beta-Garmon had eaten their strength for months, grinding down armour and gorging on bodies and bullets. The forces still loyal to the Emperor had fought with a ferocity and strength that had spilled more blood in that one

system than had been shed in the last five years of the Great Crusade. There had been no choice, though, not for the Emperor's forces and not for the Warmaster. Beta-Garmon was the gate to the Segmentum Solar. Charted warp routes converged and expanded from the system like the threads of a web. Through it, fleets of ships could run into the reaches of stars around Terra. It was not the only gate to the Solar Domain, but it was the only one that mattered.

At last the deadlock had broken. Horus had taken to the field. With him was a spear tip of the Legion's finest. Darkness and fire had followed them, as though they were the shadow cast by the Warmaster's presence. Maloghurst had remained, as he did so often now, with the *Vengeful Spirit* and the endless balances of power, now both occult and temporal, that allowed the wheels of Horus' war machine to turn. He had not needed to see his lord walk amongst the slaughter, nor see those who faced him fall.

And all had happened as had been ordained. Their enemies had fallen, and the battle, so long unresolved, had swung.

Until Horus, striding through ashes and blood – the god of the empire he would win by war – had fallen.

Fallen without a blow being taken.

And his sons had taken him, as they had once before, bleeding from the battlefield.

Maloghurst was the first to raise his head to look at the enthroned Warmaster. A high, keening pain filled his skull. His eyes tried to focus. He felt blood on his teeth.

He dropped his gaze. The pain dimmed but did not vanish.

'Sire, what is your will?'

'Time,' Horus rasped, and Maloghurst felt the pain that it cost his Warmaster to speak. 'Time has run too far. Send for them. We… we must gather before…' Horus' eyes closed, agony radiating from him like heat from a suddenly blazing fire. Maloghurst clamped his teeth shut. Bubbles of migraine colour foamed across his vision. Horus was unmoving on his throne. Shadows flickered across the walls and floor of the throne room, as though light were shining from the Warmaster. But there was no light.

Maloghurst forced himself to stand. He tried to raise his head but could not. Aximand was already on his feet, backing away. Tormageddon was shimmering, the substance of its body dissolving and reforming like a grainy

pict-image. Kibre remained kneeling at the foot of the throne, his fingers digging into the stone to hold himself in place.

‘Go…’ said Horus, his voice sounding as though it were carried from far away. ‘Summon them… My brothers…’

‘Sire,’ said Maloghurst, his voice shuddering as tidal waves of pain battered through him.

‘Ullanor,’ said Horus. ‘Ullanor…’

And then he was silent. His eyes shut. The shadows stilled, and the Warmaster sat bleeding and pale on his throne.

Layak

Screams cloaked the *Trisagion* as it rode the tides of the warp. Thirty-two thousand, seven hundred and sixty-eight humans hung from nails driven into the outside of its hull. All of them had been alive when the ship had passed from the cold of real space into the embrace of the Realm of Gods. They were still alive now after a fashion, their deaths stretched into an eternal cacophony of suffering. Daemons swarmed over them, clinging to the hull, lapping agony and delirium from the humans as their souls and bodies were torn apart. Seen from above, the *Trisagion*’s spear-blade hull seemed to wear a shifting skin of chitin and wet flesh. Torch towers burned above it, red flames billowing in slow rhythm with the screams of torment and the cries of the feeding daemons.

Beauty, whispered the voice in Layak’s skull. *Truth*…

He nodded.

‘Glory to the Eternal Four, for They are All,’ he said aloud, continuing the litany that he had been speaking without pause since the *Trisagion* breached the veil into the Sacred Realm. ‘Glory to the Eightfold Truth, for it is Eternal. Glory to the First Circle of servants, for they are most high…’

He sat at the centre of a black glass floor, before the crystal window of the tower’s viewport. The smoke of burning incense breathed around him from censers swung by eight shrouded figures. Beneath their robes each of the supplicants was a riot of mutated and mortified flesh, but in the presence of the Crimson Apostle they hid their blessings. All of them had sacrificed their sight and hearing to serve him. To attend Zardu Layak, First Chaplain of the Unspeaking, the one who is both revelation and sacrifice, was a blessing beyond imagining. To see his unmasked face and hear his private words would be beyond their souls to bear.

Further back, beside the single door out of the tower sanctum, stood two hunched figures. Red velvet swathed them from head to foot and spilled onto the floor around them. They did not move, but a candle made of human fat, blood and bone ash hung in the air before each one. Sigils marked the black tallow, weeping clear tears onto the floor beneath the shrouded giants.

He approaches, he thought, and knew it to be true even as the thought whispered through him.

He rose from where he sat. He wore no robe or armour. In these moments of contemplation Layak always chose to remember that he was flesh. Smooth muscle flowed as he stood. Branded words covered his skin from neck to toes. Five hundred and twelve languages marked him. All were from cultures that had been dead for thousands of years, some human, some alien. Layak spoke every one.

He brought his hands up to his face, covering his eyes for a second.

'*Ush-na-cathal*,' he said. He felt the call hiss into the Sacred Realm, and heard an answer. Gossamer figures of black smoke congealed around him, indistinct, like sketches painted on parchment with water and ink. The shadows of faces formed in the coiling throng, screaming with silent agony, spitting hate, weeping. Whispers filled his mind.

Who are you?

+I do not want to die…+

Who are you?

+Oh, please have mercy…+

Who are you?

+Betrayer of oaths…+

Who are you?

+You are defiler of all that once you held sacred…+

Who are you?

+Why are you doing this?…+

'*Us-ka-thed*,' he commanded. The smoke figures reached out with ghostly fingers. Their touch slid over his skin. Ice-cold fire burned through his flesh.

+We know you, Nameless One…+ hissed the voices in his skull.

+We remember…+

+The dead remember…+

Layak held his mouth shut. The agony was a supernova at the core of his being. It felt like burning, like iron nails being hammered into bone. It felt like rebirth and revelation.

Armour formed over his skin. The shape of ceramite plates, of pauldrons and gauntlets, wove into existence as the shades wrapped him. Circuitry and fibre bundles came into being and meshed with his nerves. At last he stood clad in grey, the ashen plates of his armour covering all but his head.

‘*Hess-ne,*’ he spoke.

The shades faded, hissing hate and spite as they slid back out into the infinity of the Sacred Realm. The blessed agony he had endured faded from his flesh, and he bowed his head in thanks for its blessing. Last of all, he turned and stepped to the side of the room where his mask-helm looked down from his weapons rack. Its face snarled at him with frozen rage. Twin rows of three eyes ran down the bronze cheeks, each eye burning like a furnace coal. Its mouth was a wide pit of sharp silver. Two shards of obsidian rose in horns from its brows. It had been a gift from the first of the Gal-Vorbak, and he wore it always except in brief moments of solitary contemplation. Layak reached out and took it, feeling its malice tingle with the taste of blood on his tongue.

Carefully he settled the mask-helm over his head. The hooks of its inner face bit into his cheeks. The breather-pipes connected with his armour of their own accord. Incense-laced smoke filled his next breath. Whirls of Colchisian runes spun in his eyes. Colours and dimensions that mortals could not see repainted the room around him.

He is here, came the thought. He turned and knelt as the doors into the tower sanctuary opened. The red-swathed figures turned, their shrouds rippling as they knelt. The robed supplicants could neither hear the door opening nor see who stepped through, but the presence of that being was enough to send them falling prostrate.

Lorgar Aurelian stood upon the threshold for a moment. His skin was dusted with golden powder, his cheeks and scalp painted with vertical lines of cuneiform. Crimson robes hung over his unarmoured flesh. But for his size, he would have looked like a priest from the dust planet that had raised him.

Presence radiated from him. This was not the rage that had haloed the now-exalted Prince of Blood, or the raw etheric power of Magnus. To stand close to Lorgar Aurelian was to want to hear him speak, to feel deep emotions stir at his smallest gesture, to feel one’s soul both cower and exult.

Except that Layak felt nothing, just the hooks on the mask he wore cutting his face.

‘Your beatitude,’ he said.

‘Rise, my son,’ said Lorgar. ‘I ask your forgiveness for disturbing your observance.’

‘Where you walk, truth and transcendence follow,’ said Layak. ‘To receive you in this moment is to exchange a holy task for one greater.’

Lorgar bowed his head in acknowledgement, eyelids closing briefly.

‘In two hours, we will emerge at the edge of Beta-Garmon, and there we will find the Warmaster. Messages fly by the lips of the god-made to my other brothers. He calls us together, to stand together one last time, as we once did at the feet of our father.’

Lorgar paused then walked to the crystal viewport, through which the nausea-light of the warp danced. For a second Layak wondered what the eyes of his primarch saw. The Sacred Realm was a mirror to souls, and what it showed was different to every mind that dared look upon it. Layak only saw the ghosts when he looked at the warp. He had long ago given up wondering why.

‘We answer the Warmaster’s summons and are blessed to do so,’ said Layak.

‘No,’ said Lorgar. ‘The message has not yet reached us, and will not arrive until after we are already at Horus’ side. That does not matter, nor is it why we go. We enter the crucible, my son. From here the outcome of all will follow. Time and destiny draw to a point, and the wheel of the universe waits to turn around it. This has been revealed. It is written in the voices of the storm and the blood of the dying. The fate of all is waiting to be born. Divine victory lies before us, before all humanity.’ Lorgar tuned his gaze on Layak. Reflections of screaming ghosts danced in his eyes. ‘Do you understand?’

Layak bowed his head at the words, feeling his thoughts shake.

‘Most sacred lord, how may I serve?’

Lorgar turned away again, and Layak felt the fire-glow of his primarch cool, as though it had been cast into shadow.

‘I hear the music of eternity, my son. Horus…’ He said the name slowly. ‘Something is… happening to Horus.’

Volk

‘Commander, the flight is cleared to begin final launch preparations.’

Volk did not answer the human serf. The words that the man spoke were a formality that he knew so well, their rhythms were like the beating of his hearts. He kept his gaze on the machine that lay on the rockcrete apron in

front of him. Its burnished metal skin gleamed in the red glow of the hangar cavern. Yellow-and-black chevrons marked its tail fins and wing tips.

‘From Iron cometh Strength. From Strength cometh Will…’ said Volk, and watched the words spread in white clouds in front of him. The engines in his strike fighter lit. The air began to sing. ‘From Will cometh Faith…’

A servitor began to unplug cables from sockets in the back of his armour. A tech-priest in purple-and-copper robes moved around the strike fighter, oil flicking from its brass fingers. An adept followed in the priest’s wake, pulling arming tapers from weapons and closing access panels.

‘From Faith cometh Honour.’

Volk stepped towards his craft, moving slowly in his power-starved armour. He pulled himself up into the cockpit. The sockets in the back of his armour connected to the fighter’s systems.

‘From Honour cometh Iron.’

The strike fighter woke fully. Volk felt the nerve connection tingle up the sockets in his spine. Muscles and bones ached as the sensation of iron and weapons blended with flesh. He breathed out as he felt the engine power surge down his back and the armed weapons prickle his fingers. It felt like becoming whole.

The strike fighter had a number. That was the way amongst the IV Legion. Other Legions daubed their aircraft with names, like fools hanging bells from their ears. The Iron Warriors did not, and though the Lightning Crow had been Volk’s for four decades of war, its only honour was to bear the number after its unit designation: 786-1-1. The first craft of the first squadron of the 786th Grand Flight. What remained of it, at least.

‘This is the Unbreakable Litany, and may it forever be so.’

Volk unfastened the helmet from his thigh and clamped it on his head. The canopy began to hinge closed above. Yellow light started to blink through the hangar cavern. Alert klaxons warred with the rising chorus of engines.

He closed his eyes. The silver augmetic eyeball that had filled his right socket for the last three decades unfolded a crude topography of green lines across his sight. He opened his eyes. The green projection and the physical world meshed. Status runes began to flash across his cockpit systems.

‘All flight units,’ he said, keying his vox. ‘Flight readiness complete. On the count, brothers.’

Numerals cycled down at the edge of his vision. The metal cavern wall began to slide down into the floor as the outer blast doors opened. Pulses of

red light flared in the dark opening beyond as the light of battle beckoned. Snow and ash billowed in. Volk fed power to his craft's thrusters. 786-1-1 rose from the cavern floor. It rocked in the gusting wind. Volk compensated without needing to think.

Across the cavern, sixty-four other war machines began to lift from their stations – trios of Xiphon interceptors, Fire Raptors and Lightning Crows, all of them liveried in bare steel. It was still enough to be called a Grand Flight. Just enough. All of them would go into the air light by half of the payload required for the mission. Their ammo hoppers were almost empty, their lascannon capacitors barely charged, their fuel at the lowest margin possible for mission completion. Less than a decade before, going to war like this would have been unthinkable. Not now, though… Now they were warriors starving for the means to make war.

'*786-1-2 standing by,*' said the voice of Zarrak over the vox. Volk keyed a non-verbal acknowledgement to his wingman.

'*A little grim tonight, brother?*' The metallic rasp of Zarrak's ruined voice could not hide the goading amusement in the words. Volk ignored it, though he felt his lips twitch into the shadow of a smile.

'Mission patterns locked in,' said Volk into the vox. 'Onyx command, this is flight seven-eight-six, awaiting clearance.'

Static hissed in his ears for a second. The diminishing count was racing down to zero.

'*Flight seven-eight-six, you are cleared for launch,*' came the voice of the officer. The man would be watching the data from Volk's flight and matching it against the myriad other operations around the Onyx fortress. To that human, the war for Krade would only ever be numbers and signals shunting across his senses. Volk struggled to feel anything but loathing for such an existence.

'*Iron within,*' said the officer.

'Iron without,' replied Volk, and switched to the flight vox. 'All weapons live.'

Amber weapon runes flashed to green. Shackled power built in 786-1-1's engines. The strike fighter was shaking around him as the thrusters fought to hold it in place.

The count hit zero.

786-1-1 shot forwards. Force slammed into Volk. Air gasped from his lungs. The wall of night and swirling snow raced to meet him, and then he

was out, rising into the black sky. Behind him, his squadron brothers were flowing from the open cavern mouth, afterburners streaks of blue fire.

Alerts began to scream as enemy targeting systems locked on to him. Tracer rounds and explosions boiled the night beyond the canopy. He triggered countermeasures. Flares and auspex lures scattered in 786-1-1's wake. Volk slammed the strike fighter into a climbing spiral. His wingman followed him, holding in perfect formation. The rest of the Grand Flight scattered into the air from the hangar mouth, wheeling as fire reached for them. Beneath them, the Onyx mountain range extended away to the sky. Explosions pulsed across the ground, staining the underside of the clouds. Batteries dug into the mountain flanks blazed. Small-arms fire sparkled in a sea of light.

Krade was a world on the boundary between the Warmaster's domain and the vengeful wrath of Ultramar. The warp storms that had for so long split the galaxy had guttered. The screaming tides that had blinded the Ultima Segmentum had dispersed and with its ebb, the anger of Roboute Guilliman, and every scrap of might he could call on, had begun to move in the storm's wake. The Shadow Crusade of Lorgar and Angron had wounded them, and the predations of the Night Haunter had bled them. But the Lord of Macragge had endured, and now his sons came in vengeance. Worlds held in the Warmaster's name had come under attack – some had fallen, and the loyalty of others had begun to waver. All the while, words and rumours had come from the galactic south, first in whispers then in scattered reports, of retreat and disaster: the warriors of the XIII were coming.

Across the path of this rising tide, the Iron Warriors stood. Worlds were burned, fortified or reinforced. Traps were laid in the path of the enemy. For every advance they made, the forces of the False Emperor paid and paid again. But advance they did.

Remnants of Imperial Army conquest-echelons, Mechanicum Taghmata, rogue trader households, landless Knights and the shattered remnants of Legions thought broken at Isstvan V – all fought in the armies marshalled by the Ultramarines. They fought with discipline and a unity of purpose, and that purpose was retribution. Against them the Lord of Iron stood, unbreaking, never tiring, holding the line while the Warmaster opened the path to Terra.

Krade was a keystone in that line, a world that controlled a system, and from that system projected power into other systems, without which the

enemy could divide and slaughter. It had to hold, and hold it had for sixth months. Volk had been there since Perturabo had planted his banner on Krade's northern mountains. He had watched as the pressure on the defences grew in the void, on the ground and in the sky. So far, the Ultramarines themselves had not reached Krade in force, but they would, and then the real fight would begin.

Volk was iron in blood and bone. He would fight until there was nothing left for him to fight with, and then still fight on. But sometimes, in the first moments of battle, he wondered if there was victory waiting for them.

'*Incoming enemy interceptors,*' called Zarrak.

Volk slammed the strike fighter into a spin before the auspex began to shriek the lock warning. Red runes flowed across his display. A stutter of autocannon fire lit up the night.

'*Breaking left!*' shouted Zarrak.

Volk pulled 786-1-1 out of its spiral and flooded power to the engines. Fuel warnings pulsed to amber. He rose, feeling the acceleration punch him with bone-breaking force. He did not have the time or fuel for an air duel. In his half-machine sight, he could see that his flight was with him, each craft following its own weaving path as munitions exploded in their wake. The enemy were there too, pairs of red markers converging from below and above. They would outrun them, though. Volk had seen and run the calculations; his forces would reach their objective. They would succeed.

'*What–*' called Zarrak across the vox, and then cut out.

Volk's auspex fuzzed, static squawked.

A missile plunged down from the cloud layer above them and struck Volk's wingman. Fire roared out. Volk twitched aside on instinct as a pulse of las-fire burned through the space where he had been.

A shape was falling from the dark clouds about him. The night had stolen the colours from its wings, but even in the split-second glimpse he caught, Volk recognised it. It was a Xiphon-pattern interceptor, kin to those that flew under his command. It was a predator of the skies, designed to kill its own kind. And it was not a machine that could be flown by human hands.

Volk rolled. Lascannon bolts kissed the air he passed through. Warning alarms were screaming in his ears. The vox was a static-ruined squall of signals as the rest of the flight met the enemy descending on them.

Volk blinked the automatic targeting system off as he kept rolling.

The enemy interceptor was plunging down at him like a dagger, its lascannons turning the night to strobing day. Volk triggered a burst from his thrusters. His roll stopped dead. The manual targeting rune centred on the interceptor for an instant. He touched the fire stud. A single pulse of white brilliance lanced out from his wings. It was a shot that no mortal could have made and few amongst the Legions would ever have attempted. It struck the enemy interceptor's tail and vaporised it.

Volk had two heartbeats to watch the burning craft tumble past him. In those brief moments – while half of his awareness was marking the position of the rest of his flight and their opponents – he saw the colours of his enemy lit by the fires of its death.

Blue.

Sapphire-blue. The colour of the sea under the sun at noon. And on its wings, the symbol of Ultramar painted in stark white.

So, they are here, thought Volk.

He keyed the vox.

'Onyx command, this is 786-1-1. Priority alert to all command echelon.'

His hands moved, and the fighter banked and cut down through the night towards where his brothers spun above the battle-lit land.

'*Go ahead, 786-1-1*,' said a voice that was too deep to be human.

'Forces of the Thirteenth are in the battle space,' he said. Beneath him, he saw a flash of white fire. A green marker blinked out on the flight status display. 'The Ultramarines are here.'

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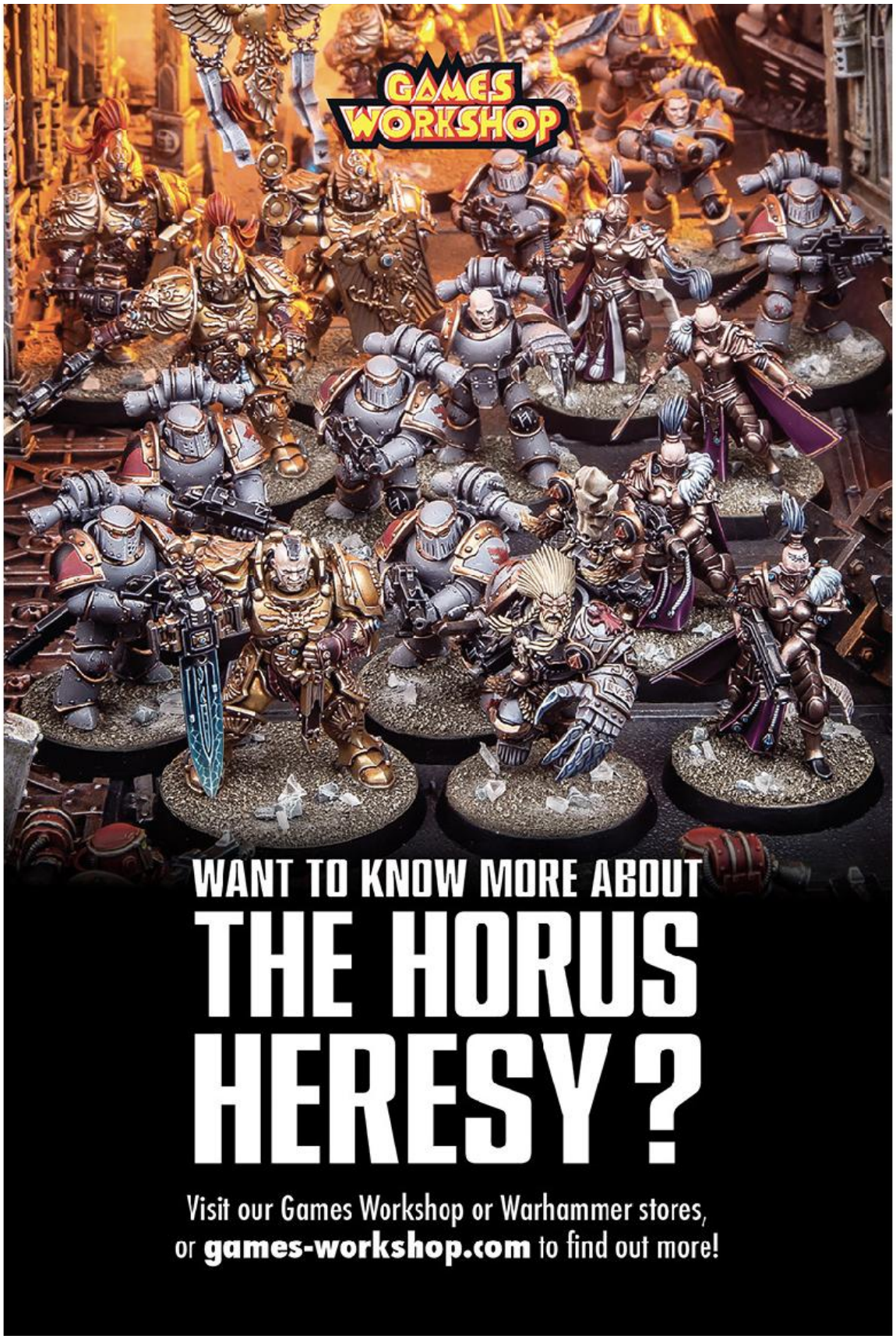
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